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SONORA BEN;

OR,

THE MOUNTAIN OF GOLD

A ROMANCE OF THE DESERT WILDS.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF THE FOLLOWING DIME NOVELS:

331. THE PRAIRIE TIGERS.

382. THE MAD RANGER.

372. THE BLACK RIDER.

408. RED DAN.

NEW YORK:
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98 WILLIAM STREET.

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SONORA BEN.

CHAPTER I.

TWO BOYS ON A "LARK."

"*Ver el burros !*" "*Burro, burro, ven a comer hoja !*"
"*Anda, Yanquès, a ver los burros, sus hermanos !*"

Such were the shouts, hoarse and shrill, but, whether proceeding from the throat of man or woman, child or adult, none the less insulting, even menacing, that rung through the dirty, foul-smelling by-street of Santa Fe, one evening in May, thirty years ago. That no compliment was intended, a translation of the words will show.

"Look at the jackasses !" "Jackass, jackass, come here and eat shucks !" "Hallo, Yankees, go and see your brothers, the jackasses !"

A Mexican—at least the *lepero*—reasons thus : "*Estrangero, Tejano, Yanque—burro.*" Stranger, Texan, Yankee—consequently a jackass. This was enough to set them afire in the year 1844, and the cries deepened and swelled in volume as the ragged, hideous, foul-smelling crowd, gathering courage by concert, pressed closer to the objects of their hatred ; two beardless lads who stood, shoulder to shoulder, against the damp dead-wall.

"The varmints mean business, Cy," muttered one of the young men, pushing the broad-brimmed sombrero back from his brow.

"Seems so—but *some* of 'em 'll sicken on it. See that coon with the steeple crown ? Leave him to me—he's my meat," was the cool reply.

The young man held a revolver in each hand, and at the sharp, double click, the greasers involuntarily shrunk back a pace, some of those upon the edge of the crowd, fairly slinking out of sight in the gathering twilight. They had heard

of this new and terrible weapon, though this may have been their first encounter with it.

"See the cowards weaken!" muttered Cyril, derisively.

"Let 'em—I won't object. I count my life worth more than a dozen greasers—and they'd knife us afore we could pick off the whole gang."

The pelado who wore the steeple-crowned hat, turned and angrily cursed his shrinking comrades. Then raising his right hand, clutching a long, venomous-looking cuchillo, he leaped toward the two Americans, snarling like an enraged wild-cat.

"Over goes *your* apple cart!" gritted Cy, as he pulled the trigger, sending a bullet through the pelado's broad breast. "Hurrah! Ralph—give 'em the best you've got in the shop—that's the sort! How d' y' like the Yankee jackasses *now*!"

As the tall pelado fell to the filthy pavement, groaning, writhing in death-agony, the crowd shrunk back as if awe-stricken. But then as the revolvers played rapidly upon the crowded mass, where each bullet found its billet, the scent of hot blood, the sight of their stricken comrades seemed to madden the mob, and with blood-curdling yells they surged forward to annihilate the two young heroes, who, though pale, confronted the horde without a tremor.

"*Hough—ough—ough—gh—h!*"

A peculiar yell—long-drawn, shrill and piercing. The Arapaho war-cry! But, why is it sounded in the streets of Santa Fe? The yelping cry of the Apache would not be so strange—hark!

Again that peculiar yell—now mingled with other no less terrible slogans. The mob is not long puzzled. They forget revenge, forget every thing save their own safety, and leaving their leader and comrades where they fell, the greasers broke and fled into the darkness, fear lending wings to their feet.

Not a little bewildered, the young men stood still, grasping their smoking revolvers as though expecting a new enemy. The heavy trampling sounds plainer and more distinct, and then about a dozen dusky figures pour into the narrow, dark alley.

"Whoo—up! whar's the muss? I'm sp'illin' fer a fight!"

uttered a hoarse voice. "Who's that skulkin' thar—speak up or I mounts ye!"

"Friends—white men, like yourself," promptly cried Cyril. "The muss is over—you spoilt it by your yelling."

"Durn the luck; but look hyar, no skin games—I'll chaw ye up and spit ye over the moon ef ye—"

"Go slow, Tom Harper, you'll need your breath one o' these days when you're dancing on nothing," laughed Cyril, stepping out from the wall.

"The two babbys, dog my cats ef 'tain't!" ejaculated the giant, in surprise. "Ye pesky little varmints! D' y' want to be chawed up to nothin' thet ye go trapsein' round like this? Don't ye know the greasers—"

"We know enough to take care of ourselves, anyhow," interrupted Ralph, "as *they* could tell you, ef they wasn't past speaking. There's three or four pelts for you, Roaring Tom."

"Babby, I've ett coyote and buzzard, but I never was so nigh gone as to raise ha'r from a yaller-skin! I'm white to the gizzard—stan' seven foot in the clear, 'thout knothole, wind-crack or—"

"Boys," quietly interposed a little wizen, dried-up specimen of humanity, who had been stooping over the fallen Mexicans, "I reckon we'd better puckachee. The boys hev throwed the 'high-muck-a-muck'; the hull rag tag an' bobtail 'll be on our heels in a jiffy."

"Whar's the differ'? Kain't we chaw 'em—"

"What 'd El Gallo say? You fergit, Roarin' Tom, as how we b'long to *him*, now," added the little man.

"Sonora Ben's right; we promised to keep out o' a muss, so we'd hev no difficulty 'bout leavin'."

"Listen!"

The quick strokes of the alarm bell were heard, and soon above this sound, the Americans could distinguish the signals and rallying-cries of the pelados.

"This 'll be wuss'n a hull ho'net's nest in about three shakes. I opine we'd better mizzle," added Sonora Ben.

"An' lose *sech* a chance—run away from *sech* fun? Ef I do may I never see—"

"Yas you will—a mountaineer man don't go back on his word, Roarin' Tom. 'Sides, ef the varmints don't find us

here, they'll be mighty apt to look fer us at the fandango, an then—"

"Ef *they* start the muss, El Gallo can't blame us ef we keep *our* eend well up—whooray! I see how the stick floats *now*, ol' beaver; gi' us y'ur paw!"

"I thought 'ee'd listen to reason, boyee," chuckled Sonora Ben. "But thar, le's puckachee."

"Come, babbys; keep cluss to me—I won't let nothin' hurt ye," said Roaring Tom, turning toward the young men.

"Thank you for nothing, elephant. You mean you want us to keep your ugly carcass from harm," laughed Cy.

"You'd orter wear a squaw's fixin's too, sence you've got her tongue. But say—*you* babby; I reckon you've got more perliteness then *he* hes—how'd you manidge to git in sech a pickle?"

"Through Cy's tender-heartedness, nothing else," promptly replied Ralph. "You see he's dead struck after a little—"

"Draw it mild, Ralph, my boy. Reel the yarn without any kinks in it, or else cheese the whole thing."

"*You* shet up—'tain't your put in. Go on, Ralph, sence that's your han'le," added Roaring Tom.

"Never be ashamed of it, Cy; she is as choice a bit of flesh and blood as I've seen for many a day. But, as I started to say, we set out for a little walk, Cy to try and find where a little blackeyed, rosy-lipped goddess lived, while I came along as a kind of protector—quit your punching, Cy!"

"A nice protector, *you*! Why, don't you think, Tom, this precious looney up and knocks down a poor devil who was just opening the door to let us inside!"

"A queer key he had—a knife two feet long!"

"Say—got any left?" suddenly interrupted Roaring Tom.

"Any what?"

"Licker. You're both drunk, or 'less you've gone crazy."

In fact the two lads had been too greatly excited by their adventure, to tell a straight story, and as what follows might be difficult to comprehend without an explanation, I give it here as briefly as possible.

Cyril Black and Ralph Eaton were cousins, "raised" in St. Louis. Their parents had been business partners before the boys' birth, nor did the connection cease until death sev-

ered it. Mr. Eaton died first, followed within the year by his partner. At this, Cyril and Ralph left school. The concern was disposed of. Now the lads—for they were barely eighteen years of age—ventured to broach an idea that had long filled their brains. They wished to make the trip to New Mexico with the next train. In vain the mothers fought against the idea. The boys carried their point, though not until the next year.

Then, however, with two wagons each, loaded with goods for the Mexican market, selected by experienced hands—for most of the traders had done business with Black and Eaton—our young friends turned their backs upon St. Louis. They had hired good hands to attend to the wagons and teams, and had little to do themselves besides enjoying the delightful overland trip. Three days' travel from Santa Fe, Ralph Eaton was taken very ill with the fever, and for a time even sanguine Cyril despaired of his recovery. The train stopped one day at Santa Fe, but as every moment now was worth money—for the long-smoldering fire was bursting into open blaze, and no white-face could say his life was safe unless he enforced the remark with a cocked rifle or revolver—they were forced to resume their journey to Chihuahua, Cyril sending on his and Ralph's teams also.

It seemed suicide for him to remain in Santa Fe, but Ralph could not be moved, and Cyril would not desert him. Then before he departed, bold Squiers had it loudly proclaimed through the streets by a Mexican, so that all might understand, that if he found the young men had come to harm in any way, when he returned he would lay the whole town in ashes. And they knew that the determined German was just the man to make good his words.

Shortly after, Ralph began to mend, and two weeks more saw him sound and hearty as before. He found that Cyril was half-bewitched by a pair of black, laughing eyes, that had often peeped into their room, and on this evening they sallied forth to solve the mystery, if possible. But they soon lost sight of the trim figure, as it turned down a by-street. Warmed to the hunt, the boys pressed on, and Cyril, believing he had marked the house she entered, peered in at the window. A trusty *pelado* started for the intruder with a *cuchillo*, when

Ralph deftly knocked him down. Then the cry, that may be heard even to this day, arose—" *Que meueren los Yanque burros !*" (Death to the Yankee jackasses !)

As the cry was caught up and repeated from a dozen different quarters, the lads began a retreat, though reluctantly, keeping the blood-thirsty pelados back with their cocked revolvers. But the mob gathered courage as their numbers increased and the twilight deepened ; then came the assault, the defense and the rescue. Recognizing those yells, the mob scattered rapidly. They did not care to meet the reckless mountain-men, who feared no odds, however great—who laughed at death.

" 'Twas a foolish trick, lads," said Sonora Ben, though in a kindly tone. " Still, I glory in y'ur spunk, durned ef I don't ! You've got the pure blood in ye—an' a hair o' the black b'ar, too.* But you've shet *this* town ag'inst ye forever. One o' you shot the chief o' the beggars—they call him thar king—an' the varmints 'll raise your ha'r for't, ef they git hafe a chainece. They're sworn to 'venge each other—to hev blood fer blood."

" We'll keep the flies off 'em while they're taking our hair—eh, Ralph ?" laughed Cyril ; yet it was evident that the old hunter's words had made an impression on the young man's mind.

" We can make it interesting for a while," quietly returned Eaton. " But where are you gentlemen bound for ?"

" The fandango—you know thar's to be one to-night."

" We'd heard something about it, but Cyril could think of nothing else but that red petticoat—"

" Whar a likelier place to find it than at a fandango—espechully when you say she's young an' likely ?"

" A second Daniel ! Old man, we're with you !" cried Cyril.

" But these yelping hounds behind us," added Ralph, listening to the cries and shouts that came from the quarter they had just left. " They'll follow us—and I'd rather fight them out in the open air than in a ball-room."

" Whar else kin ye go ? Ef ye was to go back to y'ur dgin's, nary one on ye'd ever see daylight ag'in. You must.

* A trapper term for "true grit." A spice of the devil.

stick to us ontel day, anyhow. It's like ye may see hot work as well as fun, fer I cain't remember the fandango that didn't bu'st up in a free fight. No—ye're off the trail, lad," chuckled Sonora Ben. "I don't say 'at we five—seven, countin' you in—couldn't hold our eend up wi' the greasers, but thar's no need. The boys 'll be thar—risin' twenty, all told. An' wi' them we kin take the town—eh, boys?"

"Say the valley, Sonora Ben—say the valley. Didn't I—mere babby, so to speak—didn't I flax out nigh fifty on 'em, last calf-time? In fa'r fight, too."

"'Deed you did, Roarin' Tom—though 'twas a long time afore your hide was hull enough to hold water a'ter it. But thar—cain't you hear the blessed tum-tum a-goin'? The fun's opened—le's take our sheer; but, boyees, 'member what we promised El Gallo: we mustn't *start* a rumpus."

"But ef a greaser spits in our face an' then tries to rub it in, I don't reckon we'd orter take it," observed Monte Pete, so called from his love for that intellectual game.

"No—I don't reckon the boss 'll be so hard on a feller," thoughtfully observed Sonora Ben. "Ef a greaser does that to ary one o' ye—ef he scrouddges or steps on y'ur feet, or looks cross-eyed at ye, I reckon ye'd better sock it to 'im. It'd be a dog-on shame, anyhow, to leave hyar 'thout givin' the yeller-skins somethin' to 'member us fer; but ye mustn't *begin* the muss."

Cyril and Ralph could not help laughing at the queer logic of Sonora Ben, the gravity with which it was delivered and received. Had either of them possessed a drop of cowardly blood in their veins, they might well have hesitated about trusting themselves in such company. The mountain-men were fairly "spoiling for a fight," and after what had that evening occurred, it seemed highly probable that this longing would be gratified. But, boy-like, the young adventurers did not once think of this, only remembering what they had heard and read of the wild, picturesque fandango, eager to play their part in the one spoken of.

CHAPTER II.

A SANTA FE "BREAK-DOWN."

From the open doorway and barred windows of a large *salon*, fronting upon the *plaza*, came a dim light, the shuffling of feet, and the faint tinkle of music. The fandango was fairly opened.

"Cl'ar the track fer the rip-roarin' painter o' Bitter crick an' his kumpanyeros—whoo-oop!" cried Roaring Tom, rudely elbowing the "greasers" aside, as he pushed into the hall. "Whar's the yaller-skin as kin shine when ra'al mountain-men kum to the fore?"

"Kinder easy, boyee—don't furgit y'ur perliteness," murmured Sonora Ben, aiming a mouthful of "ambeer" at the snowy-white drawers of a Mexican dandy, where they showed through the laced calzaneros. "The boss said we was to keep gentle as lambs."

"Gentle as suckin' turtles—whoo-oop! You gray-headed sinner, stan' aside—this gal says she wants to dance wi' y'ur master!" roared Tom, shoving a "greaser" aside and taking cool possession of a dusky poblano, whose lustrous eyes attracted the rattling, devil-may-care hunter.

Cyril and Ralph gazed around them with interest and curiosity. This was their first fandango, and truly it was a novel scene, even picturesque.

The room was large, imperfectly lighted by a dozen wax tapers in sconces hanging from the walls. A considerable crowd was already assembled, for the most part composed of *pelados* and *poblanos*—the lower classes. There were a few of the higher class, but here they seemed out of place.

Upon a slightly raised platform were the musicians. Twanging harp, monotonous guitar and tinkling bandolin. At the opposite end rude stands were erected, where scowling greasers and smiling poblanos dispensed fiery "Taos whisky," cigars or husks for the national cigarette. Around the walls lounged dusky, black-browed Mexicans, casting evil

looks upon the bolsterous mountain-men, who had already taken possession of the floor, yelling, whooping like madmen, yet handling their petite partners with a care and gentleness that proved how soft their big hearts were toward all women.

"Look, Cyril," laughed Ralph, a little uneasily, "Big Tom is keeping the peace wonderfully!"

"Cl'ar the track, greaser—you'll git snagged, shore!" roared Harper, coming into violent collision with a Mexican who ventured to cross the room, hurling him headlong to the floor. "Didn't hurt ye?"

With a muttered carajo the man scrambled to his feet and limped away, one hand hidden in his breast.

"Easy, babby—perlite's the word!" sung out Sonora Ben, manfully wrestling with his partner, a large, unwieldy woman, who overtopped him a head.

"Matters looking up—big sign for a free fight—see how those dirty rascals scowl and finger their knives. We'll smell brimstone before day, Ralph."

"Out of the fire—you know the rest. We'd better have kept on to our ranche," muttered Eaton.

"Not weakening? No, I know better than that. You're not fairly yourself after that cursed fever. Come—a glass of vino will set you to rights again."

"Perlite's the password, babbys," gasped Sonora Ben, as the youths passed him. "But ef any greasers steps on y'ur toes, sock it to 'im, up to Green river!"*

"Want any help, old man?" laughed Cyril, maliciously.

"Ain't she a scroudger—who-oop!"

The young men stopped before one of the stands and called for vino; and, by the way, the Vale of Taos is famous for its clear, pure grape-juice. The smiling poblano served them, while her lord and master stood by scowling sulkily. He did not like the gay compliments that Cyril was pouring into the woman's ears, in broken, uncouth Spanish.

A loud bustle at the door attracted their attention, and turning, the boys saw a crowd of mountain-men pouring into the *gala*. No mistaking their bold, daring air and reckless

* A mountain expression, signifying thoroughly; their favorite knives being stamped "Green River Works." Up to Green river—the whole blade.

demeanor. The skulking greasers, despite their gaudy habiliments, suffered from the contrast; and no one perceived this more quickly than the dusky belles. They recognize *men*, and do homage with their speaking eyes to bravery, even though it be garbed so uncouthly.

"No fear of a muss *now*, Ralph," muttered Cyril. "Look at those men—they could whip a thousand of these curs. See! they all wear revolvers!"

His tone of surprise was but natural. A recently patented weapon, Colt's revolver was then a rare and almost priceless weapon in New Mexico. Few men could afford to sport one—much less an improvident trapper. Yet each of these men—over a score in number—wore a brace of six-shooters. However, this, as well as other strange points, were soon made clear to the traders.

"Come, Ralph, let's enjoy ourselves. There don't seem to be much style required here, so I guess we can pass muster. Everybody seems trying to invent a new step. Come—"

"Cy, there's your *incognita*—look! just beyond Sonora Ben and his Mammoth," excitedly whispered Ralph.

Cyril did not wait to hear him out. He had caught sight of a well-remembered, graceful figure and roguish eye, and darted across the room.

"Perlite's the—ugh!"

Sonora Ben came to the floor with a loud grunt, as Cyril brushed by, accidentally tripping the trapper. With a murmured exclamation of disgust, the Mommoth shook her ruffled plumes and waddled away in search of a more graceful partner.

Cyril had eyes only for the *incognita*, and reaching her side he grasped the little brown paw and asked her to favor him a few moments.

"Con gusto, senor." (With pleasure, sir.)

Clasping her plump waist, Cyril whirled away, unheeding the fierce scowl and muttered *carrai* of the beetle-browed Mexican who had been talking with the woman. But Ralph did, for he had followed Black, curious to get a closer look at the strange beauty. And he kept one eye upon the pelado, scenting mischief in the air.

A man was watching Ralph, at the same time; one who had attracted no little attention, about whom a great deal of whispering had taken place since his entrance. Of extraordinary height—standing nearly if not quite seven feet in his stamped-leather botas—he was straight as a lance, lithe, graceful, a model of manly strength and beauty. Nor did his garb—purely Spanish, rich and of the finest quality—detract from this appearance. The picturesque dress was appropriate for such a gallant cavalier. He had the clear, olive-tinted complexion of the Spaniard, as well as the long mustache and beard, of jetty blackness. His hair hung in slightly waving locks, adown his shoulders, half-way to his waist. In the plain leather belt were a brace of heavy revolvers, and from the dainty ruffles of his snowy shirt-front, peeped the jeweled hilt of a bowie-knife.

He leaned listlessly against the wall, his large, lustrous eyes, black as jet, curiously resting upon the watchful Ralph, or lazily roving over the animated scene. Apparently he was an idle spectator. Certainly he had not joined in the boisterous dance.

The Mexican Ralph was watching glided across the room. The young trader saw him whispering to half a dozen of the same ilk, and followed after. He caught part of a sentence—the words *Yanques burros*—then the pelados ceased, glaring wickedly at him as he passed by.

“The whelp means mischief, but horses could not drag Cy away now,” muttered Ralph, mechanically loosening the revolvers in their scabbards. “He *will* smell brimstone before this is done with.”

“Senor,” uttered a soft voice in his ear, “your friend will get himself into trouble with that rascal’s wife.”

“Who are you?” demanded Ralph, wheeling around, his hand dropping to a revolver butt.

“A friend—they call me El Gallo,” replied the man, who was the tall stranger who had so closely observed Ralph.

“The chief of these men—”

“Yes— Ha! I knew it must come! Look to your friend if you are a true man!” said El Gallo, as a shrill yell and a dull, heavy thud sounded through the room.

“Perlite’s the word, but *durn* a greaser who will keep

scrouding' a mountain-man!" yelled Sonora Ben, shrilly, leaping up and delivering *one—two* full in the face of a tall pelado, who fell to the floor like a log.

"Whoo—oop! hyer's the cavortin' painter from Bitter crick, sp'ilin' fer a claw o' greaser-meat!"

"A hatful blind—come an' see me!" yelled Monte Pete, and his "ante" in the shape of a revolver bullet caused a greaser to pass in his checks.

"*Hough—ough—gh—h!*"

The shrieks of terrified women—the heavy trampling of the antagonists—the rapidly detonating revolvers—the ringing of steel as bowie-knife and cuchillo clashed together—the heavy thud of falling bodies—oaths, curses, yells of agony—and then the tapers are dashed from the sconces and naught lights the frightful scene save the flashing of pistols.

Cyril's rather ardent speeches were interrupted by a scream of terror as his partner shoved him violently back. A bright blade flashed before his eyes, barely missing his breast. Then the two men came into contact. But at that moment Ralph reached the spot, and with a pistol-butt felled the greaser.

"This way—they will murder you—come with me," tremblingly cried the woman, dragging Cyril to a side door, through which they passed just as the lights were extinguished.

"Our friends—Ralph, we can't leave them—"

"For love of God, senor, do not desert me! They will kill me!" murmured the woman, clinging to his arm.

"We must see her home, then return," said Eaton.

"Quick, then—our only chance is to keep together—a poor show we'd have if caught alone in the streets now!"

"'Tis not far—only a step," faltered the woman, as she rapidly led the way across the plaza.

"Ha! we are followed!" suddenly cried Ralph, pointing back. "To the wall, Cy—give 'em the best you've got!"

Like a shadow the woman glided away.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT CAME OF IT.

"SAVE your powder, young gentlemen, for worse enemies than I am," uttered a clear voice as the traders drew up against the wall, their weapons ready for use. "I am a friend—El Gallo."

"That's so, Cy—and he's alone," muttered Ralph.

"The chief of those men? Then why are you here, leaving them to fight against such odds?" suspiciously cried Cyril.

"I am their chief—and proud of the title, too. I know them too well to make a mistake—I know what they can do. There's not pelados enough in Santa Fe to stand before *that* band—in less than two minutes there'll be no more fighting—because the greasers will have fled; at least such of them as are able," quietly replied El Gallo.

"Where's the—" stammered Cyril, for the first time having noticed the fact of his pretty partner having disappeared.

"She ran away when we faced about."

"Lucky for her if your pistol-butt proved harder than her husband's skull," pithily interposed El Gallo.

"Her husband!" echoed Cyril, aghast.

"They have been married for two years past. I don't suppose it was a love-match, still, the poor devil is her sposa."

"Hark! they've left the hall—they are in open air and coming this way!" eagerly cried Ralph, as the sounds of the free fight grew louder and more distinct. "Hurrah! we have time to put in *one* lick, anyway!"

"Wait; as you say, they're coming this way. If we get mixed up with the greasers now, ten to one that some of our friends give us an awkward keepsake by mistake. Keep your place for a moment longer—watch me and follow my actions," hurriedly cried El Gallo.

"Whoo-oo! up to Green River that pop! Whar's the

yaller hide too tough for the rambunctious painter o' Bitter crick to chaw up?"

"Come an' see me—whoo—oop! Ye'd buck ag'inst *me*, w'u'd ye?—I called the turn on ye *that* time!"

"Perlite's the word, boyees—but when a greaser tries to rub it in, up an' sock it to 'im!"

The pelados were rapidly retreating before the mountain-men, who pressed them close. Still they were not entirely whipped, for the hindermost, sullenly retiring, would now and then cross blades with their enemies. But this could not last much longer. The mountain-men seemed to bear charmed lives, while the retreat was marked by the bodies of fallen greasers, either dead or disabled.

"*Cock-a-doodle-doo-oo-o!*"

"Hooray fer the boss—*now* ye'll see the feathers fly!"

With this strange war-cry, El Gallo—The Cock—leaped forward and plunged into the mass of greasers. Close beside him pressed the young traders, their revolvers speaking rapidly, keeping time with the deadly rise and fall of El Gallo's heavy bowie-knife.

This fresh attack, coming so unexpectedly, proved the final feather, and with yells of dismay the crowd of greasers broke, scattering in every direction, seeking safety in rapid flight. Yelling exultantly, the mountain-men started in hot pursuit, but a shrill whistle from El Gallo checked this, and as it was repeated, the mountain-men crowded around their strange leader.

"Sorry to spoil your fun, boys," El Gallo said, as he stooped and carefully wiped his dripping bowie upon the ragged garments of a still-quivering pelado. "But you hear the alarm-bell. In half an hour the whole town will be up in arms—"

"We kin hold up our eend, boss," muttered Roaring Tom.

"I know it—I don't doubt but that we could clean out the ranche, if hard pressed. But, boys, you know our agreement. Rest assured, you will have all the fighting you can stomach before we disband; but you must let *me* pick the cause. We have nothing to gain in this pass—it's no credit to whip a pack of these coyotes. Come, then— But how many do we lack? Who has fallen?"

"Jumpin' Jack fer one—I see'd him keel over—stuck in

the hump ribs. But the greaser as did it won't ever brag o' his doin's," quietly observed Sonora Ben.

"Ginger Blue's down, too. I stumbled over his karkidge, and he stuck me in the rump—tuck me fer a greaser, I reckon. He must 'a' bin nigh gone, sence he on'y give me a inch or so," added Roaring Tom.

"Two of our best men, but it can't be helped now. Come, we won't leave them there for the coyotes to gloat over, we'll give them Christian burial at least," said El Gallo, turning toward the deserted *sala*.

"The varmints 'll say we run from 'em," disgustedly muttered Roaring Tom.

"They can find us easily enough, if they wish. We're only goin' back to camp. If they come for us there, we'll give them ample satisfaction," grimly returned El Gallo.

One of the wax tapers was soon found and relighted. A ghastly scene was then revealed. The floor was literally covered with dead bodies, weltering in their gore, while an occasional groan or faint sigh told of wounded men. Three mountain-men lay dead; the rest, over a dozen, were "greasers." The blood-trails outside showed that many of the wounded had escaped.

CHAPTER III.

THE BOY "PARD."

LIFTING their dead comrades, the mountain-men left the *sala*, and passed through the dark streets, clutching their re-loaded pistols ready to meet the anticipated attack. The alarm bells were still pealing forth their rapid notes, and a deep, sullen, menacing roar floated through the filthy streets of the squalid city. The Mexicans appeared to be gathering together as though determined to avenge their fallen friends upon the audacious mountaineers.

"Now let them come!" cried El Gallo, breathing more freely as the narrow streets were left behind them. "The

cowards might have made it warm for us in there, but here we have elbow-room."

"They won't try it on; the durned varmints hain't got no idee o' fun!" muttered Roaring Tom disgustedly.

"The Apash 'll suit you better, boyee," chuckled Sonora Ben.

"They *kin* fight—and hyar's as don't keer how soon we buck against 'em, nuther."

"We start to-morrow, or rather to-day," said El Gallo. "But where are the young gentlemen—"

"If you mean us, close at hand," responded Cyril.

"Good! keep by my side, I wish to have a few words with you when we reach camp. You, too, Sonora Ben."

The mountaineers' camp was located close by, in fact within a mile of the city, and consisted of half-a-dozen dingy tents, three or four shockling wagons, and a number of horses and mules. The guard, four men who had been chosen by lot to remain behind to see that the thieving greasers did not make a raid upon the property, was found upon the alert, chafing not a little against the fate that debarred them from having a hand in the "fun."

"The first thing boys is to bury our dead; but keep your eyes skinned and weapons ready, for 'twould not greatly surprise me if the greasers should take it into their heads to make us a call before daylight," observed El Gallo.

"Perlite's the word, boyees—ef they *does* come, don't keep 'em waitin', but sock it to 'em!" gently admonished Sonora Ben, as he turned to follow El Gallo. The tall chief entered one of the tents and seated himself upon a buffalo-robe. Sonora Ben and the young traders imitated his example at a word.

"You are curious to know what it is that I, a perfect stranger can possibly have to say to you?" abruptly began El Gallo. "That is natural enough. Well, I'll tell you. But first, what do you intend doing after this night's work?"

"First, secure our rifles and horses; after that do the best we can, perhaps strike out after the train," promptly replied Cyril.

"How far could you two travel before the greasers would

murder you? Ben, here, tells me you have shot—in self-defense, I know—a certain rascal who is known as King of the thieves and beggars. This is a regularly organized band, and extends all over New Mexico, if not further. The members are sworn to avenge each other, to have blood for blood, life for life. It's not likely then that they will pass lightly over the death of their chief. I tell you, friends, your lives are not worth a day's purchase, unless you have friends strong enough to defy the greasers."

"Our friends are in Chihuahua, by this time. But we're worth a dozen dead men yet, eh, Ralph?"

"They'll have to take us first."

"I know you're no cowards from what I have already seen of you. Unless I felt certain of this, be sure I would never make you the proposal I am about to, but would let you go your way, since a single weak heart might ruin all my hopes and destroy the entire band. But then—what say ye? Will you enlist with me—will you join our band?"

"Certainly not blindly. Tell us what your object is, where we are bound, what you expect of us; after that we will answer you," quickly responded Ralph.

"You kin trust 'em, boss; ef they don't jine they won't split on us, anyhow," quietly interposed Sonora Ben.

"We'll keep your secret, if that's all—won't we, Ralph?"

"Certainly, only I'd rather not hear any secrets."

"It's a secret only from the Mexicans, and I don't suppose you love them any too well. In a word, then, I have raised a company to go in search of a gold placer. In order to reach it, we will have to cross the deserts, to enter the very heart of the Apache country, and it is morally certain that *me* of us will be killed or die of hardships. But for those who *do* live through it, there will be an independent fortune. The chances are about equal. We will have to endure many hardships, fight our way through many perils; yet I think the stake well worth the risk. We will be gone from three to nine months. It all depends upon circumstances. Yet we have this advantage. We know just where to look for the gold, and have a man to guide us who has seen it with his own eyes."

"Look here, stranger," eagerly replied Cyril, "are you talking about *the mountain of gold*?"

"Ha! what do *you* know of that?"

"Nothing, except what I have heard the traders say. They say there *is* such a mountain, but that no man knows where to look for it. If you *are* talking about that, and can bring a man who has set eyes upon it, I am ready—*more* than ready to join you upon such an expedition."

"And I am with you, Cy," promptly added Eaton.

"Sonora Ben, suppose you tell us what *you* know of the matter," said El Gallo, in a satisfied tone.

It would be tedious to give the old man's story in his own words, though it was a thrilling, breathless recital of wonderful adventures and privations. It appeared that years before, Sonora Ben, in company with a number of other trappers, were set upon by Indians, who, though finally beaten off with loss, stampeded their animals, leaving them afoot in the desert. With day-dawn, a terrible wind-storm arose, and completely obliterated the trail, and continued for a day and night. Even when the wind lulled, a thick vapor concealed the heavens, and no one could tell which was the proper course to follow. Nothing but sand was to be seen. But death must ensue unless water was found, and the trappers toiled on through the desert. For two days they suffered the torments of the damned. Then they found water. In the river bed they also found flakes of gold. They followed the stream to the mountains. The gold seemed more plenty the further they advanced. And then, one morning as they awoke, a marvelous sight met their eyes. A mountain of gold—yellow, glittering, alluring! Awe-stricken they gazed, spell-bound. Then they darted forward. The brilliancy increased as they neared the marvel—until it blinded their eyesight. Then—just as the incalculable treasure seemed within arm's length, the Apache war-cry sounded—the enemy were upon them. The trappers fought with the energy of despair; blood fairly saturated the sands. But numbers prevailed. All of the trappers were down save three. These men seized each one of the riderless horses that were prancing about their fallen masters, leaped upon their backs and fled. The Apaches pursued. One trapper was overtaken and butchered. The others,

soresly wounded, finally distanced their pursuers. As the sun sunk to rest that night, the second trapper died. For an hour he had been supported in the saddle by his comrade. And thus Sonora Ben was the sole survivor of that ill-fated band. And he was lost in the desert. He finally had to kill his horse for food and drink—blood. With the strength thus found, he managed to cross the desert and found water. Two weeks later he was among friends. He told his story, but, though many believed in the existence of the gold mountain, not one would dare the fearful obstacles that guarded it, until Sonora Ben encountered El Gallo.

"As you see," added the chief, "I have managed to gather a goodly band. I have paid them a year's wages—or what they could make by a year's trapping—in advance, and thoroughly equipped them. Besides, they are to share equally in the gold we secure. I offer you the same terms. Will you accept?"

"Yes—we will go. But we are already well armed and mounted; we don't ask any wages—only a share in the proceeds. How is it, Ralph?"

"My sentiments, exactly. And here's my hand on it."

"Thank you, gentlemen. I don't know two recruits I'd rather have, though you are so young. I 'froze' to you from the very first. Then it is all settled? Good! let's drink to our complete success!"

"When do you start?" asked Cyril, after this ceremony.

"To-day. We will camp on the Del Norte to-night."

"Then there's no time to lose. Our animals and rifles are at the *venta*. Besides, we must leave a note for our friends, or Squiers will play hob with the greasers when he returns and does not find us. Come, Ralph."

"Ben, you'd better take a couple of boys and go with them. They are marked men now, and if alone, the greasers may give them trouble," added El Gallo.

"I think we will be safer alone," smiled Ralph. "We can reach the *venta* unobserved, where half a dozen would be sure to attract attention. Half an hour will settle our business there, and we can get outside again before 'tis fairly day."

"I don't know but you're in the right. Don't grunt, Ben—I know *you* are perfectly polite and quiet with the greasers,

but the boys, now they've tasted blood, might not be so circumspect. Still, friends, if you *should* get into trouble, a yell or pistol shot will bring us to the rescue, double-quick."

"'Bove all, don't fergit to be perlite—but ef the greasers don't 'preciate it, jest sock it to 'em an' squeel fer us," earnestly advised Sonora Ben, as the boys arose.

"All right—if we can't manage them ourselves," laughed Cyril. "Come, Ralph, let's be moving."

"What kind of a snap is this we've got ourselves into, Cy?" asked Ralph, as the friends left the camp of the mountaineers behind them. "What d' y' suppose our folks 'll say if the train returns without us?"

"Too late to think of that now; we've passed our words. Besides, we started out to see a bit of wild life, and surely this trip promises *that* much. Lord! what a yarn that was of old Ben's! I could scarcely keep from yelling right out—my blood burns yet!"

"It *was* hot—and I'm as eager as you can be to see some of the fun—besides, that mountain of gold! It beats Aladdin's lamp all hollow! But the mothers—I don't like the idea of—"

"Pook! we'll get back all right—and may be in time to overtake the train, after all. But to make sure, we can leave a package with the host to give to Squiers. We'll have time to write a few lines to the good mothers, just telling them we've resolved to take a little hunting-trip before returning."

Thus conversing, the young traders rapidly neared the city, over which hung a cloud-like, hazy vapor, rendering the low adobe buildings vague and phantom-like. The dull, sullen roar of the excited inhabitants had completely subsided, and all was still as death save for the occasional yelp or lugubrious howl of some starved cur.

Just as the comrades were entering one of the narrow streets, a human figure glided rapidly toward them, crying, in Spanish:

"Beware, sirs, the assassins are lying in wait for you! Flee—flee for your lives!"

"What's that—assassins—who do you mean, my man?" spluttered Cyril, not a little taken aback by this sudden apparition, and strange warning.

"Don't stop to talk—fly, before 'tis too late! Hark! they have heard me—they are coming—they will murder us all! Holy mother of mercy, save us!"

"He's right—some one is coming, Cy," muttered Ralph. "Shall we stick it out, or trust to our heels?"

"Look—they're coming—I don't want a stab in the back; let's see what they're made of, anyhow," coolly returned Black, pointing toward several shadowy figures in the street before them.

"If you fight, make quick work—then run to where your friends are, for the alarm will spread like fire."

"What—you here yet? Better cut it, friend, or your people yonder will gobble you, too," hurriedly said Cyril, not a little surprised to find the stranger still beside him.

There was no time for a reply. The skulking figures now made a rapid rush, and through the gloom the young traders could distinguish the cold glitter of bared steel. The assassins did not expend their breath in idle yelling—but darted forward with a dull, snarling sound that told how deadly earnest they were.

The young traders stood shoulder to shoulder, and as soon as they could fairly distinguish the assassins, their revolvers spoke. One form dropped heavily to the ground, yelling shrilly with pain. But the rush was not checked. The others came on as though determined to end all at one blow.

Twice Cyril fired, but the third time the hammer failed to explode the cap—a mischance that bade fair to be fatal. A tall, powerful pelado was almost within arm's length of the youth, his long cuchillo raised to strike, a hand extended to clutch Cyril by the throat. There was not time to cock the revolver—the blow would fall first.

At that moment, when death seemed inevitable, a lithe figure darted before Cyril, crouching beneath the upraised steel, and then a knife was plunged deep into the broad, heaving chest. With a fierce *carrai*, the pelado staggered back, dropped his cuchillo, and then sunk quivering to the ground, the blood bursting from his lips and nostrils. The knife had reached the seat of life.

"Bully for—hullo!"

Cyril's exclamation was cut short as he saw a tall form leap past him and strike once, twice, in quick succession, laying two greasers beside their fallen comrades. It seemed like play—but it was *death*!

"El Gallo—and just in time, too," panted Ralph, brushing the blood from his eyes, a cuchillo having just grazed his face as its wielder fell with a bullet-bored skull. "They was pressing us hard!"

"Perlite's the word! Leave us fellows some!" came a distant cry, that told of Sonora Ben's approach.

But he was too late. The two surviving assassins as they recognized the terrible El Gallo, took to their heels and fled like frightened coyotes.

"Who is this stripling?" asked El Gallo, peering curiously into the young Mexican face; for such the person appeared to be, who had so opportunely warned the young traders of the ambush they were blindly walking into.

"I only know that he saved my life, at the risk of his own. It was neatly done, too, though I wonder that he still lives," warmly cried Cyril, grasping the bloodstained hand.

"A greaser, too! Well, we'd better keep on and finish your work, now we're here. Lead the way to the venta."

"Durned ef I call that perlite, boss—takin' the hull fun y'urself, jest 'cause your legs is the longest!" sulkily grumbled Sonora Ben, panting heavily with his rapid run.

"Nary a chaw left fer the painter! Some folks is sech contrairy hogs!" murmured Roaring Tom.

"Ben, you, Tom and Monte Pete come with us. The rest will return to the camp, and remain there quietly unless they hear my whistle. Go now—if we linger here, we'll have more of the greasers on our backs, and blood enough has been spilled—too much I fear, for our quiet departure."

The mountaineers obeyed El Gallo without a remonstrance, thus proving the wonderful influence he had acquired over these reckless spirits. As Cyril Black led the way to the *venta*, the Mexican youth kept close beside him, casting apprehensive glances into the darkness upon either hand.

A good deal to their relief, the traders found their property safe and untouched, though how long it would have remained so, when once the Mexicans had time for collected

thought, is hard to say. A brief note was left with the host for Squiers, together with letters for the trader to deliver in St. Louis, Cyril particularly impressing upon the Mexican mind that a safe delivery of these charges would be the only method of saving his scalp from the choleric trader. This matter satisfactorily settled, their bills paid to the full, the young traders left the *venta* and set out for the camp. By the way many a venomous look was cast upon them, though no one dared to obstruct their passage, and more than one bitter malediction and significant threat was hurled at the Mexican lad who had taken part with the accursed Yankees.

"Don't mind them, friend; we'll see that they don't hurt you," cheerfully observed Cyril.

"A bad look-out for him after we leave. They'll murder him by inches," muttered El Gallo.

"He saved my life, I'll not desert him, even if I have to give up this trip," quietly rejoined Black.

"I can't go back there. Let me go with you, sirs. You are brave men—nor am I a coward, when there is a chance for life," cried the lad, his eyes flashing, his chest dilating.

"Who are you? I've seen you before, some place."

"I am Pepe, *her* brother, the woman whom you helped home from the fandango. *He* came back and beat her terribly—I fear he has given her her death; but she told me to watch them and warn the young gentlemen if there was danger. I heard them talking; they swore to kill you, so I followed them. You know the rest. I had to kill one to save your life. And the others, *he* was one of them, saw me. He will murder me, like he did my poor sister."

"No, because you shall go with us. I owe you a life, and you shall never come to harm while I can lift an arm."

"I know him now," said El Gallo. "He *is* her brother. Though he will not be of much service, he may go with us, for they would murder him here."

"May the blessed Virgin bless you!" faltered the youth.

"I will work, slave for you—"

"No more of that, boy; you're my friend and pard now," quoth Cyril.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SLEEPLESS FRIEND.

"Look yonder—we're going to have visitors, I guess," suddenly cried Cyril Black, some two hours later, nodding toward the town. "Curious to know how we feel after our little dissipation, last night, I suppose."

"Pepe seems to recognize them," quietly remarked Ralph.

"It is he, my step-father, he will kill me!"

"Not much he won't, youngster. We'll have a word to say about that, I guess. If he comes after you, he'll go back empty-handed, unless you choose to go with him, of your own will."

"Wal, may I be dum-mizzled!" ejaculated Roaring Tom, glancing around as these remarks met his ear. "The impudence o' some reptyles!"

"Don't be ha'sh, babby; they don't know no better. It's our duty to teach 'em perliteness," added Sonora Ben.

"My fust gold dornick ag'inst a sand-rat's hide, I kin let daylight through the head cuss's top-kiver," leered Tom.

"Too long odds, babby; but don't draw a bead *too* low."

Half-a-dozen greasers were slowly approaching the camp, now a scene of bustle and confusion, for the party of gold-seekers were nearly ready to take up their long and toilsome trail. The Mexicans slackened their pace, as though not exactly relishing the idea of bearding the reckless mountaineers in their own stronghold, and when some two hundred yards distant, halted altogether, one of their number shouting out a few words that proclaimed his ardent friendship for los Americanos, and expressing a wish to speak with the great chief, El Gallo.

This man was the one on whom Roaring Tom set his sacrilegious eyes. He was tall and personable in figure, wearing a steeple-crowned sombrero, ornamented with gaudy-colored ribbons whose ends streamed far down his shoulders.

"Quick, or ye lose y'ur fun, the boss is comin' this way," hurriedly added Sonora Ben.

The Mexican seemed anxiously awaiting the reply to his summons, when Roaring Tom cocked his rifle, grinning broadly. The long, weather-beaten weapon rose rapidly, then for a moment remained motionless as though held in a vice. The whip-like crack followed, and dropping the butt to the ground, Roaring Tom burst into a wild, reckless laugh that fully sustained his *sobriquet*.

The Mexican staggered back and sunk into the arms of his comrades, uttering a sharp exclamation, one hand clapped upon his head. At this moment a stern voice abruptly checked Roaring Tom's cachinnation.

"What's the meaning of this? Ha! did you shoot that man, Roaring Tom? What had he done?"

"Jest air-holed his hat a leetle, boss. 'Twar a long pull fer the ole weepin, an' I reckon the lead dropped 'bout an inch. But see, he ain't hurt, look yander! Go 'way quarter-hoss! you ain't got no aidge on *them* critters—ho! ho! hoo!"

Indeed the Mexican had been more frightened than hurt, though the bullet, in passing through his hat, had grazed the skull beneath, momentarily stunning him. But now, one and all, the greasers took to their heels, covering the ground with a celerity little short of marvelous.

"An idle trick, and you are old enough to know better, Roaring Tom. It is through just such mad, hair-brained tricks that our expedition will be brought to naught, or lose every one of us our hair. You are a stout, true man, Tom, and I wouldn't want a better comrade, only for this one thing. Will you promise to be more careful, or must we shake hands and part here? You know I can't have *all* our lives risked by one hair-brain."

"I didn't think, boss, raaly; but I'll mind what you say, I give you my word o' that. You won't hev 'casion to talk no more," muttered Roaring Tom, earnestly, thoroughly subdued by the kind tone of El Gallo.

"That's enough; you're one of my best men, Tom, and I'd hate to lose you. I don't know as there's any harm done, this time. But come, all is ready. We must camp this night beside the Del Norte."

Ten minutes later "boot and saddle" was scounded, and

the little band of adventurers rode away from the campground, entering upon *the trail of death*, though in that hour no such vision passed their mind's eye. Instead their spirits rode riot—reveling in fantastic dreams of untold wealth—of the fabled *mountain of gold*. They had caught the *yellow fever* in its most virulent form.

The cavalcade made quite a show. Besides the twenty-nine men—including the three new recruits—all superbly mounted upon animals that had been chosen for speed and endurance, regardless of cost, there were a dozen sturdy pack mules, now lightly loaded with provisions and a few tools such as El Gallo's mining experience told him would be necessary. On their return the mules would be more heavily laden—with the treasures of the golden mountain. So at least devoutly believed nearly, if not quite all of the adventurers.

Alas, well! we all of us entertain foolish dreams at times.

The gold-hunters rode rapidly on without drawing rein until near mid afternoon, when they halted beside a small arroyo to breathe their animals, and improve the time by taking a hasty snack. Nothing was talked of but the object of their expedition, and had Sonora Ben answered in full the thousand questions poured upon him, his tongue would have been worn to a stump. For a time he bore up manfully, though answering tersely, but at last even his politeness—and the reader has already seen what a prominent item this was in the veteran's composition—gave way, and he cursed them all, roundly and in unmeasured terms, for a "imperlite, on-mannerly, clickety-clackety caboodle," winding up by consigning them to that region where sulphur and brimstone are no rarities.

Mounting once more, they dashed across the shallow stream, when Pepe, whose eyes were frequently turned upon the back trail, gave a sudden exclamation that attracted Cyril's attention.

"I feared it—look yonder—we are pursued!"

Just rising the sand hill along the back trail, a mile beyond the arroyo, was now visible a cloud of dust or sand, constantly increasing in size. There could be only one reading to this. The cloud was raised by horse's feet. Even

were the gold hunters in the range of the wild mustangs, would a drove thus follow a trail? Scarcely.

"Ha! the greasers can not bear to let us go without a farewell," said El Gallo, showing his pearly teeth in a derisive smile. "They think we're running away for fear of the consequences of our little diversion last night, or they'd scarce follow us so botly. All right. As well end it here, before their courage cools. We don't want them tracking us *too* far."

"'Twon't work, boss," quietly remarked Sonora Ben. "You won't git *them* critters to come 'ithin arm's len'th o' us. They'll take it out in yellin' at a safe distance, an' then turn tail an' hurry back to boast o' how they made the cussed Yengees run. Oufu!"

"I'd like one more chaw o' greaser, afore we see the tail eend o' them—pervided *you* say so, boss."

"I give you free leave to chaw up the lot, Roaring Tom, if they give you the chance," laughed El Gallo. "But keep on, or they'll cool down too quick. If they think we're afraid of them, maybe they'll find courage enough to come within distance."

"You're trembling, Pete—you ain't afraid?" asked Cyril.

"No—only I feared you would give me over to them, rather than have any further trouble. I know they're coming after me."

"Well, I must say you've got a modest cheek, for one of your size. One would think you were a great treasure, or a runaway princess in disguise!"

"No, sir, I'm only Pepe, a poor boy without father or mother—but I am *your* friend," muttered the lad, turning his head aside, his voice trembling with emotion. "You were kind to my poor sister—and *he's* killed her—*ay de mi!*"

"There—I was only joking—you mustn't mind my rough ways. You're a slap-up nice fellow, and I'll call you my brother, as I do Ralph, here. The inseparable triplets!"

The dust-cloud was lifted by a passing gust, and the pursuers could be distinctly made out. The foremost wore the dingy, faded and tattered uniform of Governor Armijo's regulars." Behind them rode a motley rabble, uniform in only one respect; the entire party were superbly mounted. In all they must have numbered one hundred perhaps more.

"We'll have a fight for it, after all," said Ralph, to El Gallo, who rode beside him. "They are four to one."

"A close guess, which leaves the odds in our favor. Six to one would be more even. You don't know the greasers as well as I do, my friend. I could take ten men and charge through yonder rabble, and not run half the risk there would be in charging as many oxen. They are a pitiful set—and the *soldiers* are the worst of the outfit."

"How does *that* agree with your words?" asked Cyril, as the Mexicans uttered a loud cheer and spurred their animals into a dead run. "That might look like cowardice to a blind man, but—"

"Patience—you will see how true were my words. Men keep your eyes front. Keep pace with me. Possibly if they think we are trying to run away from them, the greasers will find courage to measure strength with us. Watch me, and time yourselves accordingly."

With these words El Gallo touched up his horse and rode forward at a hand gallop, closely followed by his men. The Mexicans uttered a yell of triumph at this supposed homage to their valor, and pressed forward in hot haste, eager for the fray, since there promised to be so little resistance.

El Gallo smiled grimly as their exultant yells saluted his ears, and bore gently upon the curb, almost imperceptibly slackening the pace of his animal. Having thorough confidence in their leader, the mountaineers closely observed his every motion, imitating them exactly. Thus, though apparently fleeing with all the speed their jaded animals were capable of, the gold-hunters were cunningly lessening the distance that separated them from their foes, their object unsuspected.

"Now—wheel right and left, boys, and put in your best licks!" cried El Gallo, wrenching his animal's head around, charging the Mexicans at full speed.

Uttering their wild, uncouth war-cry, the mountaineers promptly imitated the example of their leader. The movement was so sudden and unexpected, that before the Mexicans realized its meaning, rifles and revolvers were playing rapidly upon their confused ranks, and blood began to stain the trampled sand.

Then were El Gallo's contemptuous words full justified. The Mexicans did not strike one blow in return. They thought only of flight, and even cast aside their weapons as incumbrances. Possibly the pelados might have offered some resistance, for they are undeniably more brave than the "rank and file," but the gallant soldiers dashed headlong through their midst, and then catching the panic, the entire company fled at break-neck speed.

Pursuit was not prolonged. El Gallo sound the recall, and the signal was obeyed, though reluctantly. The mountaineers were like wolves who have just tasted blood, hard indeed to choke off their prey. Three or four of the Mexicans had fallen, but they were not further disturbed. In mountain eyes a greaser's scalp is even less prized than that of a Digger, and who would stoop and rifle the pockets of such scum, when the glorious, dazzling mountain of gold loomed up in the distance?

The gold-seekers construed their bloodless—upon their side—victory into a favorable omen for the ultimate success of their venture. Your true trapper is great on signs and omens. They are his great medicine.

After this little incident, the gold-hunters rode steadily on, nor did they again draw rein until the Del Norte was reached, though this was not until the sun had been hidden behind the Sierras for nearly two hours. Following the old prairie motto—"never camp upon the wrong side of a stream,"*—the party crossed the river and then made their simple preparations for spending the night.

The horses were unsaddled, the mules relieved from their packs and then turned loose to forage for their selves, the only precaution taken to guard against their straying being the "side-hopple;" the fore and hind legs upon each side being connected by stout thongs. This allows the animals to walk freely, but hinders them from running, and is the best preventive in the world against a stampede, since each and every hopple has to be cut before the animal can flee. These precautions were taken not because the mountaineers apprehended danger, since they were not yet in the Indian

* In other words, if the stream must be crossed, do it at once, lest a sudden rain should hold you waterbound for days.

ground, but lest the animals should take it into their heads to swim the river and return to Santa Fe, where many of them were bred and raised.

Half a dozen small fires were kindled and the mountaineers squatted around them, roasting chunks of antelope-meat, two of these creatures having fallen prey to the rifles of Monte Pete and Yankee Dan, just before sunset.

El Gallo, Sonora Ben, Cyril, Ralph and Pepe had a fire to themselves, and though the long ride had somewhat jaded the boys—who had hardly touched the “hog-skin” during the past three weeks—the little party were in high spirits, laughing, joking, carrying on merrily. That is, all save Pepe, the Mexican. He was very quiet, never speaking unless directly addressed, and gradually edged away from the fire until he sat in the shadow, silently smoking a husk cigarette he had absently rolled up and ignited, seemingly buried in a deep, far from pleasant reverie.

Their hunger fully appeased, the gold-seekers lounged at ease around the fire—for though the night was almost oppressively warm, the sand-flies were troublesome unless where the acrid smoke stifled them—smoking their pipes and beguiling the hours with tales of past adventure or else dwelling upon the golden treasure that awaited their coming.

But finally, one by one they dropped off, and then the camp was silent save for the crop-crop and faint unsteady tramping of the grazing animals. The fires burned low, then ceased to flicker as the embers gradually covered themselves with a coating of ashes. All was silent—all seemed peaceful.

Yet 'twould have been better had El Gallo ordered a regular watch kept, on this first night out, for, despite the apparent security, death was in the air—the avengers of blood were afoot, bent on their dread mission.

Faintly outlined, dim and indistinct, blended with the shades of night as they noiselessly crawled up the river bank, a number of human figures slowly neared the camp. Betwixt their teeth they carried naked knives. Their eyes glittered ominously through the long hair that straggled across their faces. They meant murder; perhaps they would have called it vengeance.

Stealthily, noiselessly the human serpents creep on, nearing their unconscious prey. A mustang raises its head with a tremulous snort, and suspiciously eyes the shadowy figures, one foot partially uplifted as though to give the alarm. But there is no motion now about the shadow—a shadow it must be, nothing more. If alive would it remain so motionless? And then with a short snort of disgust at its own folly, the mustang lowers its head and once more crops the juicy grass.

The blood-avengers creep on by scarcely perceptible degrees, until their leader pauses beside the nearest sleepers. He cautiously raises his head until he can peer into the muffled face of the gold-seeker. The tangled mat of stiff, wiry beard tells him that this is not the victim he seeks. And with a deepening scowl he noiselessly rounds the fire, peering into each face in turn, at times fairly stilling his breath lest it betray him.

The band of assassins have separated. It is evident that they seek some particular victim, and fear lest some one should awake and discover their presence ere the death-blow be discovered. For this reason they separated, and now a dozen shadows are hovering around the unconscious sleepers. So silent and noiseless is their progress that it seems scarce possible they can be weighty flesh and blood. Rather are they ghouls, seeking their forbidden, unhallowed feast.

Each one of the shadows cast frequent glances around as though watching the progress of the others. Such is indeed their object, for as one of their number suddenly pauses beside a recumbent figure and elevates his arm, the other shadows instantly glide toward the spot, clutching their long knives, licking their hot lips as though already reveling in the coveted feast.

But then comes a sudden and thrilling change.

A lithe form half arises and the sharp crack of a revolver echoes upon the night air, mingled with a horrible yell of death-agony as the baffled assassin falls back, tearing and biting the sandy earth in his last struggles.

Instantly all is confusion. The mountaineers, only half awake, spring erect, grasping their weapons. The assassins,

now thinking only of themselves, dash frantically toward the river, using their venomous knives freely upon every thing that bars the way. And before the shrill voice of Pepe can make them comprehend the truth, the avengers of blood are half-way across the river, safe from pursuit in the gloom of the night. Nor was the confusion lessened by the plunging and snorting animals, who endeavored to burst their hobbles.

"Look to the animals, boys!" shouted El Gallo, as he stooped over the now motionless assassin. "A greaser—you shot him, Pepe?"

"Yes, captain; he was about to strike Senor Black—you see the knife in his hand yet," faltered the Mexican.

"The second time; my boy, don't do it again, or I'll never be able to repay you," lightly said Cyril, but his warm, eager hand-clasp spoke plainer than words.

"Nina—my sister—told me to give you my life, if it should ever be needed," simply replied Pepe.

"I knew this rascal; he belonged to the Beggar Band. They came for *you*, Black. Well, it's not likely we'll be troubled again to-night, yet I'll keep watch myself," cried El Gallo.

CHAPTER V.

LOVE'S SACRIFICE.

THOUGH such a journal might be interesting to the general reader, I do not purpose giving a daily record of the gold-hunters' progress. The route was not unmarked by adventure, both humorous and exciting, though only the common mishaps of such a journey, with an occasional adventure with a panther or bear.

Nothing more had been seen or heard of the Mexicans since their night attempt at assassination beside the Norte, and the general belief was that they had given it over as a bad job, preferring the forfeiture of their oath to that of their lives. Neither had the adventurers met any Indians, though now fairly within their hunting-grounds. Once a compara

tively fresh trail was discovered, probably that of a hunting-party, and the gold-hunters used double precautions for several days, but of late there had been no suspicious signs.

The country passed over was varied, from the barren desert to the rich, green-grass prairie. One day the gold-seekers would be crossing a wide, gently-undulating prairie, rich with flowers of every shape and hue. The next, perhaps, would be spent in a weary, depressing stretch of sand—a foretaste of the great desert that was yet to be encountered—where nothing relieved the aching eyes save now and then a few scattered clumps of the bitter sage, or the queerly-shaped ridges, heaps and curves of sand—the “sand-hills” of New Mexico, where the glowing sun cast its powerful rays upon the desert, then arising in dizzy lines of heat almost unbearable.

Again the prospect would change. Far away in the distance loomed up tree-crowned hills. Hoarse exclamations of relief would break from the jaded adventurers, their laboring animals would prick their ears and increase their pace, eager to cross the space that divided them from rest and plenty.

Again the scene would be enlivened by huge herds of shaggy monsters—the bison. And for a few minutes might be heard the sharp reports of rifles and revolvers. But the adventurers were not men to waste time and ammunition—in these wilds far more valuable than its weight in gold, since the lives of all depend upon it—in the mere wantonness of slaughter. They slay to eat, and then are satisfied. They are in the heart of the hunting-grounds. Here graze the almost countless bison. Yonder, skimming the green sward with matchless speed and grace, passes a herd of antelopes or “goats.” Prowling around the outskirts of the herds, watching the coveted prey greedily, may be seen scores of wolves, coyote and the more powerful gray. Again, a drove of mustangs thunder by, circling around their strangely deformed brethren, snorting, neighing, fighting fiercely among themselves, wildly tossing their uncontaminated manes and tails, long, silken and flowing, as though glorying in their freedom, their strength and speed, in their shining, motley coats of a thousand different markings and hues, then, their curiosity satisfied, the very earth trembles beneath their tread as they

speed away from the unaccustomed sight, seeking some favorite feeding-ground.

Reader, can you follow the gold-hunters in their varied march—can you appreciate their wild freedom? Not unless you have “been there.” Ah’s me! does a prairie-born steed ever forget his native home, his free, untrammelled life, even in slavery? If so, then he is happier than man; this wild, free life once tasted, can never be forgotten, never thought of save with longings and yearnings for the past.

Such life the gold-hunters enjoyed, and they made the most of it, though anxious to reach their priceless goal, for they knew that ere many hours all this would be past—in the great desert there would be no beautiful landscape, no water—naught save dreary sand.

At one camp, when a week out from Santa Fe, an incident occurred that came near being fatal to Pepe, the young Mexican. The camp was beside a small stream that wound along the base of a rocky ridge, scantily fringed with stunted trees and shrubbery. The fire for cooking their evening meal was carefully hidden behind a screen of bushes and blankets, lest its bright beams should be noticed by unfriendly eyes upon the broad, level prairie. The thin, fleecy smoke that rose from the dry fagots could not be distinguished against the dark hills, for the sun had set, and twilight there was little or none in that region.

Suddenly, without any other warning than a loud *sniff*, a large grizzly bear parted the bushes and lumbered out into full view, so close to where Pepe crouched that the lad could almost feel its hot, fetid breath upon his neck. Acting on the impulse of the moment, Pepe drew his revolver and hastily fired at the bear. Though struck in the throat, the huge monster did not appear to be inconvenienced by the leaden pellet, though he plunged forward with an angry snarl. Pepe tried to flee, but his foot slipped and he fell at full length, directly in front of the enraged animal. Death seemed inevitable.

But at that critical moment a full score of rifles were discharged, and at such close quarters that the grizzly’s shaggy fur was scorched in patches. The monster fell heavily forward, pinning Pepe to the ground.

The lad half turned and clapping his pistol to the brute's head, fired a second shot. But it was not needed. The bear was already dead, his brain pierced, his heart torn into shreds, though in falling, its outstretched claws had severely scratched the youth's legs. But in a day or two, Pepe was as well as ever.

At length, when nearly two weeks out from Santa Fe, Sonora Ben declared that another day's travel would carry them into the desert, and that they must prepare for the dread journey at once, before entirely out of the hunting-grounds. Thus they went into camp earlier than usual that evening, upon the bank of the last stream they would meet with until across the desert. Not only must they prepare food for the crossing, but as the gold mountain was in the heart of the Apache country, where the report of a single rifle might bring a countless horde of bloodthirsty enemies upon them, El Gallo resolved to secure and jerk all the meat the pack-mules could carry, at this comparatively safe spot. The hunting and curing, since the rays of the sun must be depended upon for the last, as building fires for such a purpose was out of the question, would occupy at least four days.

Bright and early in the morning the gold-seekers were afoot. The majority were detailed as the hunting-party, and divided to scatter in every direction in order to cover as much ground as possible, and thus, if one failed to find game, some of the other parties would be more successful. The remainder of the party were to remain at the camp to prepare for jerking the meat.

Cyril and Ralph were of the hunting-party, and as a matter of course they kept together. The comrades had already decided upon their plan of action for the day.

They remembered having crossed a long, narrow valley, through which trickled a tiny stream of clear water, late in the afternoon the preceding day, and knew that it could be only a few miles distant. While crossing this, Ralph had noticed the peculiarly rich grass beside the stream, and from the multitude of tracks around, he argued that the valley was a favorite feeding-ground of antelopes, at least.

"We can try it, there. But there's no cover for our horses."

"We can leave them in the pass. The grass and bushes will do to cover us—besides the wind is fresh; that will make stalking all the easier," replied Ralph.

The young gold-hunters rode briskly along the back trail, chatting carelessly, vouchsafing only a passing glance to the few antelopes or occasional buffalo that might be seen upon either hand, far off across the green waving sea. To secure any of these would require too much work—both of the head and the body—so at least reasoned our friends, and they rode on toward the valley, little dreaming what there awaited their coming.

"Look!" suddenly exclaimed Ralph, reining in his animal and bending low in the saddle. "Some one is before us—see those hoof-prints."

"A back trail is generally marked with tracks, I believe," returned Cyril, laughing.

"Yes; but look—the trail points ahead—in the same direction we are taking. I didn't think any of the men could have got ahead of us. The tracks are fresh, you see,"

"Made yesterday, for all that, I'll bet. There was no dew last night to disturb them. I *know* that we stole a march on any of the boys who may have thought of coming here."

"It may be; but I don't believe this trail was made yesterday. Remember we are in the Indian country now."

"Don't be a fool, Ralph. Look at the trail. The fore feet are shod. Do Indians patronize the blacksmith? Not much!"

"But Mexicans often do; and the Indians patronize *them*. Still, I don't know as there's any danger just now, though I half believe this is the trail of some one who has been spyin out our camp," thoughtfully said Eaton.

"A spy on horseback; lad, your wits are wool-gathering. But come on; I'll eat all the red-skins we find in the valley will that suit you?" laughed Cyril.

Eaton said no more, but followed his more reckless friend, and soon after they reached the pass already spoken of, which cut the long line of rocky hills in twain, affording easy entrance into the valley beyond. Dismounting here, the young men secured their animals in a clump of bushes close to the edge of the valley, and then peered out from their covert.

A scene of beauty met their gaze. The valley, half a mile in width, lay between high, rocky hills, with almost perpendicular bases, not unlike the famed "Palisades." Adown the valley wandered a purling brook, its bed shallow, lined with pebbles and sand. A low fringe of grass and bushes grew along the margin, but elsewhere the valley was carpeted with a fine close-set sward of rich grass, that appeared to have been kept trimmed by a professional gardener. But antelope leers and buffalo were the only gardeners that claimed this spot.

"Look—I told you so! Yonder is our game—and up the wind, too. We can creep to the brook, and then it is only a bit of creeping. Not many of the boys will have such an easy snap," eagerly muttered Cyril, pointing up the valley, where over a dozen antelopes were grazing all unconscious of threatening danger.

"Down, then; we must creep to the water. I don't think they can sight us if we lie flat," cried Ralph.

Cyril prostrated himself, and then worked his way toward the brook flat upon his belly, dragging himself along by the hands. Ralph promptly imitated his example, and the passage was accomplished without alarming the game.

Once in the brook bed, the hunters carefully looked to their weapons, seeing that the tubes were well primed, and then pressing the caps firmly upon the nipples. The water, though cool, was quite refreshing, since the sun's rays gave evidence of an unusually hot day.

All in readiness, the two comrades stooped low behind their cover, and cautiously advanced toward their game. Not a sound betrayed their passage, such care did they use, and the antelopes fed on, unsuspecting their danger. And yet the hunters were observed; more, they were recognized. Evil eyes were watching their every motion, and peculiar signals were made and answered. Still they crept on, little dreaming of the trap that was being laid for them.

In this manner Ralph and Cyril crept on for over a hundred yards, then paused and peered through the leafy screen. The antelope had moved further in, though still feeding as though fully at ease. But at that moment there came a change, sudden as it was unexpected.

The leading antelope—a grizzled buck, raised its head and snorted suspiciously, stamping sharply with one fore foot. Then the entire herd turned and started down the valley with the speed of the wind.

Cyril flung up his rifle and fired as they passed by, and with a convulsive bound one of the does fell dead. Ralph did not fire. The strange actions of the antelopes puzzled him. What had alarmed them?

“Load up, Cy; haste, for God’s sake! There’s deviltry brewing; look out for goats!”

The antelopes abruptly halted when nearly abreast the pass, hesitated for a moment, then turned back for a few yards, huddling close together, trembling with fear. And now the young hunters could distinguish the rapid beat of hoofs upon the rock-paved pass.

“And look! a man upon the ridge—see! he is making signals—hear him yell—and motioning up the valley!”

“A greaser, too—if ever there was one!” uttered Cyril, hastily reloading his rifle. “Ralph, we’d better pucka-chee.”

“Too late—we can’t reach our horses—see yonder!”

“’Tis Pepe—are you blind, Ralph?” retorted Cyril, as a horseman spurred into the valley from the pass.

“Look beyond—and hark! Cyril, we’re hemmed in!”

Such indeed appeared to be the case. From below the pass where the young men had left their animals, came half a dozen riders, whose gaudy dress and equipage pronounced them none other than Mexicans. Shrill yells, mingled with the rapid beat of horses’ hoofs came from up the valley, and a moment later as many more horsemen burst into view.

Beyond a doubt it was the scent of these men that had alarmed the antelopes, who found their flight obstructed below, and now the terrified creatures ran hither and yon, distracted with fear, their peaceful paradise transformed into a pandemonium.

“Then we’ll fight ’em here,” said Black as he rammed home the well-leathered bullet. “Hand me a cap—quick!”

“Ah, senors, forgive me!” gasped Pepe, as he flung himself from the saddle beside the brook. “I tried to warn you in time, but could not. Here, senior Black—brother—take

my horse. The cowards will give way if you dash boldly at them—you may escape."

"And you?"

"I will fight with our brother here—go—go quick!"

"Too late—even if I were the craven you think me. Halt! there," Cyril added raising his voice. "A step nearer and I plug ye!"

Either because they hoped to secure their ends without coming to blows, or that, feeling so confident of their prey, having them so completely hemmed in, they felt inclined, cat-fashion, to dally with their victims before slaying them, the Mexicans promptly obeyed the stern challenge, and reined in their animals.

"Surrender, then, and your lives are safe. Throw your weapons out upon the ground and hold up your hands," cried a tall Mexican, authoritatively.

"Don't hearken to him," whispered Pepe, who had entered the brook. "He can not speak the truth—you know him."

"The husband of your *incognita*, Cyril," half-laughed Ralph.

"What if we refuse?" asked Cyril, in reply.

"Then we must take them—but you must pay the price. Surrender, and we will take you safe back to Santa Fe. Refuse, and we will kill you, one and all."

"You haven't men enough to do that little job—we've whipped you once and can do it again. Ralph, take the lower party—I'll look to these above."

The Mexican raised his voice, but the sentence was never finished. Cyril took a quick aim and the bullet sped true to its mark. With a hoarse, broken yell of rage and agony, the tall pelado fell from his horse, the hot life-blood spouting from his mouth and nostrils. At the same instant Ralph fired, with no less effect, and thus the first blow was dealt.

"Pistols now—ha! the cowards are retreating!" yelled Cyril, not a little astonished to see the greasers suddenly wheel their animals and gallop away, hanging by one foot to the saddle, a hand twined firmly in the long manes of their animals.

"Beware! 'tis only a feint—the lassoos!" wildly shrieked Pepe, trembling like a leaf.

"He's right, Cy—out with your knife! If those cussed ropes touch one of us, we're gone!" echoed Ralph.

The pelados, when beyond pistol range, rose in the saddle and grasped their coiled lassoes. Then in deadly silence they spurred their animals along beside the brook, shielding their carcasses as before, holding their ropes ready to rise and cast as soon as within reach.

"Pop at their animals—the shots may bring our friends to the rescue," muttered Cyril, setting the example.

One horse was crippled by the bullets, falling heavily and casting its rider with crushing force to the ground. But then the greasers rose up and cast their lassoes.

With a shriek of horror, Pepe sprung before Cyril, flinging up his arms, trying to ward off the fatal noose. The loop encircled them both, drawing them forcibly together. Quick as thought Ralph severed the lasso with one stroke of his knife, and the greasers swept by, baffled for the time. At least so they believed.

Yet when Cyril sprung erect, Pepe fell back gasping, bleeding, the ivory haft of a knife protruding from his breast—the knife that had glittered in his hand as he raised it to ward off the threatening ropes!

The descending loop had knocked the weapon from his hand. It fell, strangely enough, between the two. As they were drawn together by the tightening noose, the keen blade pierced his breast, pressed home as the haft rested against Cyril's chest.

"Look out! they're coming again!" cried Ralph.

"Hurrah! and so are our friends! Whoo-oop! boys—give it to them! don't let one escape!" screamed Cyril, leaping forth from the brook, discharging his revolver as the terrified Mexicans dashed past, hotly pursued by a dozen mountaineers who came thundering through the pass.

"Whoo-oop! cl'ar the track fer the squeelin' painter o' Bitter crick!" roared Tom Harper as he passed.

"We'll teach 'em perliteness!" screeched Sonora Ben.

"Cyril—help—Pepe's dying!" cried Ralph. "Ho! good heavens—'tis a woman!" and he started back aghast as well he might, for in raising the stricken Pepe to examine the wound, the soft, full bosom of a woman was revealed.

Cyril, bewildered by these strange words, stood staring upon the blood-stained figure in mute amazement. The being they had known as Pepe, feebly opened her eyes, and evidently misconstrued this expression, for a faint flush tinged her cheek, and she murmured:

"You hate me—and I loved you so dearly!"

"No, I do not; I could not hate you; but it is so strange, so unexpected—" stammered Cyril.

"And so unwomanly—add that, too! And yet, what was I to do? What was there left for me? *He*—my husband—cursed and reviled me, calling me all the foul epithets his tongue could utter, and then he beat me—beat me until I lay senseless, like one dead. My brother—poor Pepe!—tried to save me, but that man struck him—with a knife. I found him dead when my senses came back to me. No—" as Ralph made a motion to remove the knife—"you can do nothing for me—I am dying now; and 'tis better so."

"You must not try to speak—it is killing you," said Cy.

"What matters a few moments? I must die soon—but not while you think so evilly of me. Listen—what I tell you is true—as true as the Holy Virgin!

"I said that I loved you. When I saw you shrink back so from me I meant to die with that secret my own. But, I'll not deny it now. Yet I did love you, long before you saw me. Now I feel easier—nay, do not speak. My time is short—my breath begins to fail me.

"I heard them plotting to kill you too. I took some of poor Pepe's clothes and followed them. You know the rest. They recognized me—would have killed me. What was I to do? True, I could have died. But I lived for you. I believed they would attempt your life again. They did—I saved you from their knives. Again to-day, I found their trail—I tried to save you—but they were too quick for me. And then—well, I am dying. One thing. As the holy mother of God hears me, I never meant to reveal myself to you. If you had discovered me, I had resolved to kill myself. Believe this—it is all I ask now."

"I do believe it," replied Cyril, with a strange choking in his throat and a suspicious moisture in his eyes.

"Then I can die happy! See—kneel beside me—take my

hand—it saved your life—and look 't to my eyes—so! Mother of Jesus, I come—ah!”

With these words the strange woman plucked the knife from her breast and flung it away. One brief fleeting smile—a look of pure, holy love, and all was over.

She was dead.

Beside the gentle murmuring brook they laid her clay, and many a secret prayer was wafted to heaven in her behalf, from lips that, however accustomed to blasphemy, were sincere and earnest now. And the tears of friendship moistened her grave.

CHAPTER VI.

THE AWFUL MARCH.

ONE week later. Where are the gold-seekers? In the heart of the great desert—in the valley of the shadow of death!

Every precaution that prudence or experience could suggest was taken. They remained upon the banks of the Rio Carello for four days, sun-curing the game they had killed. Every thing that could possibly hold water was carefully filled. And then they confidently started upon a journey across a desert infinitely larger, more difficult of passage than the one to which has been given the terribly significant title—*Jornada del Muerto*—the Journey of Death.

For three days and nights they had pressed on, halting only for a few minutes at a time, since safety lay only in reaching water. And yet they were still in the desert. Look toward whichever point they might, naught save dreary desolation met their aching eyes.

Early on the third day, a sudden change came. The rays of the sun lessened their brightness, the sun became obscured. A dull, leaden vapor seemed to descend upon the desert, rendering all objects uncertain and indistinct at a few rods distance. The heavens were invisible. Yet this seeming

fog had no refreshing coolness. Indeed, there seemed to be a noxious vapor rising from the sand—hot, fetid, nauseating. It sickened the strongest of the gold-hunters. It dulled their senses, rendering them almost incapable of action, seemingly bewildering their brains for they scarcely paid any attention to their animals as the poor, suffering creatures staggered wearily on through the burning sand, sinking over fetlock deep at each step. It resembled the dull, yellowish haze of the dreaded vomito.

During the third night a breeze sprung up that dissipated this haze, and both heaven and desert had assumed their wonted aspect as the sun arose. But the harm had been wrought.

In their temporary stupor, the gold-hunters had forgotten their customary prudence. Their thirst had been doubly increased by the sultry heat, and they had mechanically quenched it at their water-gourds and skins, even wasting the priceless fluid by forgetting to recork or protect them as usual. And in addition to this, the animals, suffering more than their masters since they were denied aught to quench their thirst, had strayed widely from the direct trail, losing many a precious hour in aimless wanderings, only kept from lying down in despair by the raging thirst that goaded them on, even when dying.

Such was the terrible truth to which the gold-hunters awoke on the fourth morning—awoke, for if not sleeping, they had passed the night in a stupor, unheeding aught around them. Their throats, parched and cracked; there was only water enough to barely moisten them. And Sonora Ben stared helplessly around him. He could recognize no familiar landmark. All was strange. The sun told him the general course he should follow, but no more. He saw that they had wandered aside from the right trail. But how far? Ah, much depended upon the answer! Life itself. Near the center of the desert was situated the gold mountain. Around it was a fertile tract. But this tract was small in extent. And upon every side of it lay broad desert wastes. Should they miss this tract—!

This was the dread fear that for a moment unmanned the old trapper. But then his indomitable spirit returned, and

knowing that hesitation would be fatal, he led the way once more, urging on his laboring animal mercilessly.

With every passing moment the blinding rays of the sun became fiercer and more fervid, glancing up from the dazzling sand, seemingly increased in power by the refraction. A strong breeze was blowing—but it seemed the suffocating blast from a furnace, and only lifted the burning crystals to fling them spitefully into the faces of the weary toilers.

Through the burning, blinding sand the death-marked cavalcade toils, staggering over the long, undulating "sand-hills." Here and there grow a few bushes; the wild sage and the grotesque "greasewood." Here lies, half-covered by the shifting sands, a few white bleached bones, the skeleton perhaps of some wild animal—in rarer instances that of a human being. The iron-nerved mountaineers can not entirely hide the involuntary shudder that creeps over their frames, for they wonder how many hours can pass before they too deposit their bones as these are.

Now one of the horses—the heavy "States horses" invariably succumb first—pauses with a rattling groan, its legs wide spread to support its trembling frame. The rider strikes it with spur and lariat. It struggles on for a few yards, then sinks to the ground. Its earthly race is run.

The mountaineer staggers on, afoot, giving his rifle and pistols to a more favored comrade. Or else he unloads one of the pack-mules and drags himself upon its back. No one notices him. They are past feeling curiosity. He might lie down beside his dying animal and gasp out his life in humble company. It would be the same. Only one sensation remains—thirst. Only one thought, one hope, one prayer—*water—water!*

"Ha! look—the mountain—the green—the trees! There *must* be water at last!"

"Tis El Gallo who speaks, his voice sounding harsh and unnatural. He points forward. Directly in front looms a dark mass, a mountain, thick-clustered with shrubbery. Surely water must be found where is such luxuriant shrubbery! So believe the trappers—and so their animals seem to reason, for they prick up their ears, lift their drooping heads and break into an unsteady trot.

But distance is deceptive in this elevated and crystal atmosphere. Hour after hour passes, and the toiling, eager gold-seekers find that the mountain appears fully as far distant—nay, even further, since the mountain is no longer a mountain, but a large hill—the stately trees are stunted and dwarfed—the longed-for goal seems receding even as they advance!

A mirage—that wondrous limner of the desert whose fantastic creations put to shame the legends of fairy-land—outdo the splendors of the Arabian Nights—can *this* be naught substantial, a mere floating mist? No; the outlines are now too sharp and distinct, too clearly defined. It is a reality, though now divested of the magnifying veil; a low hill, instead of a mountain; dwarfed cedars and pinons instead of towering trees.

Despite the despair that again seized upon their hearts, the gold-hunters spurred on the now dejected animals, and dismount at the hill's base. But their search is unavailing. There is naught save glaring sand, bare rocks and withered shrubs. No water, nothing to quench their agonizing thirst, except—

“Boys,” hoarsely muttered Sonora Ben, drawing his knife, “we don’t stan’ much show ’ithout the critters, but thar’s on’y one thing as *kin* save us. Drink we *must* hev, ef it’s on’y blood.”

“Right, Ben; better that than die here like dogs,” replied El Gallo. “But stop; I am still chief, all must share alike. Catch the blood in this oil-skin blanket, then we will measure it out to each man.

Even then his words were listened to and uncomplainingly obeyed. One of the animals that had sunk to the ground utterly exhausted, was slaughtered, its blood caught, and then the gold-hunters one and all, eagerly swallowed the loathsome draught as it was handed them, and longed for more! And more they did have, until their overloaded stomachs refused to retain the hideous draught, for when they once more endeavored to take up their weary trail, two more of the horses refused to arise. They were dying. And again the knife was used, again the red draught was eagerly swallowed!

Wearily, scarce able to drag one foot after the other, the cavalcade wound round the hill and staggered across the desert waste. They dared not pause. Those in the saddles passed their time in nodding with fatigue and wild, incoherent ravings; those upon foot plunged blindly on, scarce conscious of the efforts they were making.

Ere another hour the men began to experience the pangs of thirst with redoubled force. The life draught had lulled it for the moment, but now the hot blood they had swallowed so greedily, seemed to increase their former torments. Their lips became parched and swollen, their eyes bloodshot, and a giddy, nauseous sickness seized upon them.

Retching and vomiting, one of the footmen fell upon his face, and groveled in the hot sand, unable to rise unassisted. And his comrades, lost to every thing save a sense of their own sufferings, stagger on, unheeding his husky moans. He who fails now must bide his fate.

Still on the wretched sufferers creep. And for what? How much easier 'twould be to lie down and die at once. Why struggle against relentless fate?

Because the hand of the Omnipotent is guiding them even now—is leading them to renewed life—to safety! What else causes them to keep on in such a straight, undeviating line, when their senses, almost their consciousness is lost, sleeping? Not a hand touches the bridle-reins—the gold-hunters are too far gone for that. Then why is the straight line followed—why not deviate to either side? The instinct of animals; so would reply a skeptic.

Yet for two hours the animals plodded on, before they gave any evidence of awakened instinct. Then indeed they did brisk up their ears and increase their speed. And thus disturbed in his stupor, Sonora Ben glanced up and gave vent to an unearthly yell of delight, that roused the company.

“Whooray! thar's water, boys—we're saved!”

Before them, indistinctly seen by the moonlight, was a clump of trees, fresh and full leaved, rising out of the desert waste, a veritable oasis! Ah! what a glorious sight was that! Would the fabled gold-mountain have excited such delirious joy? No; this was the *fountain of life*!

The animals broke into a labored trot, urged on by many

a blow and kick. The entire party seemed mad. They yelled and shrieked, laughed and shouted, cursed and prayed all in a breath. Some flung themselves to the ground and staggered forward on foot, fairly outstripping the horses. Others, less strong, were unseated by the sudden start of their animals, and strove in vain to regain their feet, exhausting their trifling remnant of strength in the effort, then lying still and motionless upon the scorching sands, dying while in sight of life and renewed strength.

The oasis was reached. Men and animals crowded into the little shallow pool that surrounded the desert spring, gulping down huge mouthfuls, endangering their life even while seeking to renew it. And then, gorged to the throat, they lay like logs upon the cool ground.

Cyril Black was one of the first to reach the spring. He, like the rest, drank copiously, but fortunately his stomach rejected the greater portion of its load, and he sunk back upon the edge, insensible. Thus he, sooner than the rest, regained his senses, and awoke greatly refreshed. He drank eagerly, this time with exquisite pleasure. Then he glanced around upon his companions. A cry of horror broke from his lips.

Where was Ralph—his brother? Gone! But where—when did he fall? Cyril clasped his brow and tried to recall the past. He could not—it was too vague and indistinct—like a hideous, distorted dream—a nightmare. He could not remember how long it had been since Ralph had ridden beside him—an hour, a day, a week? He could not tell—and a groan of heart-rending agony burst from his lips as he realized the dread truth—that Ralph was dead!

"I will find him—save him or die—Ralph, dear friend, I am coming—wait for me—wait, I am coming!"

The words broke from his lips as he rose to his feet, half insane. But as he was about to leave the oasis, the water flashed upon his eyes. He remembered what he had suffered—how his life had been renewed, and turning back, filled his gourd. Then he left the oasis, staggering along the back trail calling wildly, incoherently upon his friend to wait for him—beckoning to the shadowy phantom that danced before his eyes—in agony because he could not overtake it—because it retreated as he advanced.

"Ralph—'tis me—Cyril, your brother!" he would say, but the phantom still eluded him—still beckoned him on.

But then his cry was answered—a feeble sound; but 'twas recognized. And then Cyril stooped beside a dark figure lying in the sand. 'Twas Ralph. He had been unseated in the sudden start for the oasis.

Cyril managed to place the gourd to his lips, and the grateful liquid gurgled down the parched throat, and then, wrapped in each other's arms, the brothers in heart sunk to rest—a rest that seemed to be death.

CHAPTER VII.

ROARING TOM'S LAST SCRIMMAGE.

THE sun was fully two hours high when El Gallo lifted his head and stared around with a bewildered gaze. It seemed like awaking from a horrible dream. Here was clear, cool water, fresh, green leaves—how strange, then, that his dreams should have been so frightful—of thirst and starvation—of death in the desert!

With these thoughts the chief arose and staggered to the spring, drinking heartily, then bathing his head and shoulders. This seemed to clear his clouded brain, and he glanced hurriedly around upon the recumbent forms, with kindling recollection, as he muttered, almost unconsciously:

"I remember now—'twas no dream—we were lost in the desert—dying of thirst—surely some *did* die—I can remember, now, having seen them fall by the way. But who were they—ha! the boys—gone!"

As he glanced over the sleeping figures, El Gallo missed those of Cyril and Ralph. This discovery acted like a spur—it roused him from the languor that held his limbs as well as mind enthralled, and he was once more himself, the indomitable, energetic chieftain.

From their first meeting El Gallo had taken a strange degree of interest in both of the young traders, though if any thing,

Cyril interested him the more deeply. It was the feeling of a father for his brave, gallant sons, rather than the quiet sentiment of a passing friend.

El Gallo called loudly upon his men, shaking them roughly by the shoulders, even dashing cold water into their faces in his eagerness to arouse them from their heavy slumbers. It was not difficult to arouse Sonora Ben or Roaring Tom, for their iron frames had better sustained the past fatigue and privations, and with their aid El Gallo soon had the entire party upon their feet.

Ordering them to bathe thoroughly, that their brains might be clear, El Gallo hastily caught and arranged the disordered equipage of the horses. These had fared well during their masters' slumber, despite the bitts in their mouths, and seemed quite ready for a gallop. By this time the gold-hunters knew what was in the wind, and were eager to take the back trail, though it seemed that the search must be useless, unless to give their fallen comrades a decent burial. Without water, they must have died, hours since.

"Boss," suddenly uttered Sonora Ben, "I reckon you've fergot one point, hain't ye?"

"What is that? I don't know, Ben," returned El Gallo.

"I know this place now. It's the on'y water 'ithin nigh a hundred mile o' here. Nat'ally it's a great stopping-place fer them as is crossin' the big sand—which, I take it, is mostly red-skins. They's like a flea—you cain't count on 'em fer sartin—they turn up jest whar an' when ye don't want em. S'posin' they'd turn up here—"

"You're right Ben—you're right. We must hold the spring for a while, at any rate. Both men and animals need a little recruiting. Then here—you, Harper, Monte Pete and Lucky will come with me. The rest will stay here, and keep a good look-out. Don't forget our lives may depend upon it. True, there may not be any Indians by here for a month—or they may come in sight within the hour. But you must act as though expecting them every moment. Remember, if they *should* come, it will be death to all if they gain this spot. You understand?"

The gold-seekers saw the truth of El Gallo's words, and promised to be watchful. Then, leading several extra ani

mals, the five men left the oasis and took up the back trail. Not without great reluctance on the part of the horses, who had not forgotten the fearful sufferings of the desert, and who could not see the reason for leaving the earthly paradise they had so blindly stumbled upon.

Their water-gourds full, and pouches well supplied with jerked meat, the little party galloped on at a rapid gait, having no difficulty in following the trail. It was deeply imprinted, irregular and broken, like that made by a party of drunken men and beasts.

"It's durned queer!" suddenly broke forth Sonora Ben, whose withered features had been for some time puckered into a knot of perplexity. "Wonder how long sence that feller tuck to w'arin' his moccasins heel fo'emost?"

"What fellow—what do you mean, Ben?" asked El Gallo.

"Look thar—it's plain aplenty now, though I didn't notice it tell a bit ago. Some one has bin on the back-trail afore us," replied the guide, pointing out a single trail.

"It must be that one of the men was thrown, and then wandered off this way, not knowing what he was doing. Quick—we may be in time to save the poor devil yet!"

"The trail in the air 'll be easiest followed, I'm thinkin'," cried Roaring Tom, pointing significantly upward and ahead.

Several broad-winged scavengers of the desert—the zo-pilote of Mexico—were slowly sailing in gradually narrowing circles, drawing nearer and nearer to the earth with each moment. The spot over which they hovered was about two miles distant, and the ground was hidden from the gold-hunters' view by a low ridge of sand.

El Gallo did not speak, but spurred on as rapidly as his animal could carry him, followed slowly by the others. In a few minutes the ridge was reached, and the objects that had attracted the vultures was now visible. A black mass lay upon the burning sands—a human body. Half a dozen of the vultures had already alighted, but they rose with heavy wing at El Gallo's yell, as he dashed up to the spot and leaped from the saddle.

"The babbys, by the 'tarnal!" yelled Roaring Tom, in surprise. "An' dead—kicked the bucket a-huggin' each—"

"Whoo-oop! the kitten's alive—look at his winkers!" cried Sonora Ben, in ecstasy, as Cyril opened his eyes and feebly raised his head with a look of wonder.

"Look at the dried mud on his duds—he's bin at the spring—thar's the meanin' o' your back track, Sonora Ben," added Monte Pete, pointing to Cyril's clothes.

"Yes, I came back for him—for Ralph," muttered Cyril, "and now he is dead—dead!"

"No—he lives—you have saved his life—see! his heart beats—he breathes! You must have brought him water—you made him drink?" uttered El Gallo, hurriedly.

"I don't know—I can't think—it seems all like a dream—a horrible nightmare. My brain aches—it is so dizzy, and—and I am—so sleepy."

With these disconnected words, Cyril's head drooped, and he fell asleep. Nor did he awake while the gold-hunters lifted both Ralph and himself to the saddle before Monte Pete and Lucky Ike, who immediately set out for the oasis, while the other three followed the trail still further back.

At the oasis, Cyril and Ralph were carefully attended to, by their rough but skillful nurses. Sonora Ben ventured to build a tiny fire of thoroughly dried sticks that he found in the hot sand, and made a little strong soup, which he fed Ralph. Cyril was stronger, and after his long sleep, manfully tackled the dry jerked meat, and before sunset, he and Ralph were cosily conversing with each other, very unlike dead men.

El Gallo returned just before twilight. They bore one dead body. Two other men were missing, but their fate could no longer be doubted. They had perished of thirst, beyond a doubt.

The dead man was buried beside the oasis, and all traces carefully removed, lest the grave should be rifled by the next passing body of Indians. And then, first setting a watch, to be relieved at stated intervals, the gold-hunters composed themselves to rest beside the "fountain of life" so fortunately discovered.

The night passed without alarm, and with the dawn of a new day the gold-hunters awoke refreshed and almost fully restored to their wonted health and spirits. Yet, after con-

sultation it was decided to remain another day at the oasis, that the animals might be better prepared for the two days' journey that yet remained of the desert before the mountain of gold could be reached.

Sonora Ben had studied out his position, and felt confident that he could either regain the lost trail, or else lead the way by a direct course to the fertile valley in which the mighty treasure was contained. And thus put at ease upon this score, the adventurers spent the morning hours in putting their weapons in thorough order. During the terrible jornada little heed had been taken of them.

Ralph was more like himself, now, and, though the young men did not say much in words, the manner in which they kept together or followed every motion of the other with beaming eyes, showed plainly that the recent adventure had only served to deepen their love and trust.

It was but little past the meridian when one of the men on watch came hastily to the spring beside which reclined El Gallo and Sonora Ben. His eager countenance told the tale even before his tongue pronounced the words :

"Boss, I reckon we're gwine to hev some fun—thar's a powerful cloud o' dust a-risin' beyont."

"Indians—and coming this way, of course. There can be but one reading to such a riddle. Ben—Harper—set the boys to work securing the animals—see them well tied. Make haste now; there's no daylight to burn. We must keep the varmints from reaching this cover, at all risks."

"'Twill be tough work. They've rid a full hundred miles 'ithout water—thar critters 'll charge right in, whether thar riders hes got the stomach for 't or not. Whoo-oop! boys—pick up y'or moccasins lively, fer meat 'll jest *more'n* go wolfin' this pop!" chuckled Sonora Ben.

The gold-hunters promptly obeyed the orders of their leader, and as the oasis was so small, the animals were secured without any difficulty and tied by their lariats to the stunted trees around the spring. Then each man clutched his rifle and hastened to the side of the cover nearest the approaching enemy—for friends were not to be looked for in that section.

The dust-cloud that the keen-eyed look-out had sighted

had now lifted so that the forms of horses and their riders were distinctly visible, though yet a mile distant. They were Indians, as the tall lances, the floating robes and nodding crests plainly proclaimed.

"On the war trail, fer a bale o' beaver!" muttered old Ben. "Ef 'twar meat they's a'ter, they'd b'ar farder east'ard. Look at thar critters! Nigh tuckered out, *they* is. Wal, so much the better fer us. Them imps 'd make it hot fer us, ef they war in good fightin'-trim, sence they're two to one."

"Is that odds, armed as *we* are?" laughed Cyril.

"Don't be sassy, babby—'tain't perlite. Them's Apash—the pizenest critters fer fightin' you ever heard tell on—onless 'tis a full-blooded Cheyenne. They're wuss 'n 'Rapahoes—which is sayin' a hull jugfull."

"Right enough, Ben, though we can whip them," replied El Gallo. "But remember this: if one of those devils gets away and carries the story to their people, we will have the entire tribe on our backs. So do your best—don't waste a bullet—strike home if they come to close quarters, and if they turn tail, mount and follow them hot-foot."

"Then, look'ee hyar, thar mustn't be no tomfoolery—no shootin' hafe a dozen bullets in one karkidge. Let the varmints come 'ithin pistol-range, then fire two or three at a time, from right to left," added Sonora Ben.

El Gallo saw the propriety of this hint, and gave his men strict injunctions not to fire out of turn. If, as was likely, the Apaches should shield themselves behind their animals before the entire volley was delivered, they were to aim at the horses, since a dismounted savage would have but faint chance of escape from the desert, at least in time to injure them.

By this time the Indians had approached so near as to render further speech or movement dangerous, and the gold-seekers crouched in ambush with cocked rifles, eagerly awaiting the signal that should give them leave to attack their bitterly-hated enemy.

The Apaches seemed too eager to gain the spring to give much if any thought to its harboring enemies, nor is there much to wonder at in this lack of caution, when the location of the oasis is considered—it being almost inaccessible from

that portion of the country occupied by the pale-faces. As for red-skinned foes, was it likely that a body of them, sufficiently small for the little clump of timber to conceal, would dare venture into the very heart of the Apache country?

Their animals, though advancing at a gallop, made but slow progress through the heavy sands, and seemed utterly exhausted. Only for the spring being so near, they could never have been punished out of a walk. They no longer proceeded in Indian file, or two abreast, as Apaches usually ride when treading the war-path, but pressed on to their death in a straggling mass, half a hundred in number.

"Why don't El Gallo give the signal?" impatiently muttered Cyril. "Surely, they're close enough!"

"Don't be snatched, babby—'tain't perlite. Boss knows what he's doin', never fear. You hain't see'd him in a up an' down fight yit. You'll hear—Thar! what'd I tell ye? Whoo-oop! sock it to 'em, boys!"

El Gallo's rifle rung out sharp and clear, and one of the leading Apaches leaped convulsively from his saddle, falling to the sands with a dying howl, his brain pierced by the unerring bullet. And then, in rapid rotation, the rifles of the gold-hunters followed suit, and the front of the savage mass wilted before the deadly storm of bullets, as the grass does before a prairie-fire, only a few of them sinking behind their horses' bodies in order to escape the withering fusilade. But the half-tamed mustangs were almost beyond all control, what with the sudden sheet of smoke that puffed out into their faces, added to intense thirst, and instead of pausing, they dashed on toward the oasis, where their keen scent told them water awaited their parched gullets.

"Whoo-oop! sock it to 'em!" yelled Sonora Ben, leaping up with revolver in hand. "Wade in, boys!"

"Hyar's y'ur splendiferous painter from Bitter crick as kin chaw up more Apash 'n any two-legged galoot 'at ever trapped beaver or lifted ha'r!" thundered Roaring Tom, breaking cover, as though about to charge the entire band of Indians.

"Come an' see me! Hyar's the high muck-a-muck as kin take in y'ur chips!" squealed Monte Pete.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo-oo-o!"

"Go in, lemons, if ye do git squeezed!" chimed in Cyril.

"Hoop 'em up, Liza Jane!" shouted Ralph, infected like the rest, adding his peculiar slogan to the uproar and tumult.

Partly through their natural courage—which can not be denied even by their most inveterate foes—but more because their animals had become unmanageable, the Apaches leveled their lances, drew arrows, and charged down upon the oasis, where they were promptly met by the gold-hunters and their deadly revolvers. And then ensued a *melee* that baffles description.

The gold-seekers, upon foot, and armed with that most terrible of all weapons at close quarters, Colt's "Navy," possessed a decided advantage over the Apaches, who were carried on by their thirst-maddened horses, whose plunges unsteadied their riders' aim with both spear and arrow. Then, too, just as they reached the line of cover, the Indians were thoroughly cowed by the endless storm of lead, and strove to turn their animals to seek safety in flight. Very likely they had never met with, perhaps had never heard, of the wonderful weapon that required no reloading, and imagined they were confronted by ten-fold odds. And as their animals fought desperately against being turned away from the water they were famishing for, keeping their riders busy, while the steady-nerved pale-faces picked them off one by one.

When Roaring Tom uttered his characteristic war-cry, he broke cover and recklessly rushed to meet the enemy. His revolver dropped one Apache, and he was just sighting another, when a tall, gayly-bedecked savage shortened his lance and fairly ran the bold fellow through, lifting Harper clear off his feet. With the roar of a wounded buffalo-bull, Tom clutched the stout shaft, snapping it in twain as though composed of glass, and then strove to grapple with the chief. But the plunging mustang reared and beat Harper down with its fore-feet, and then dashed into the covert.

Ralph Eaton rose up and fired a shot so close to the Indian's face, that the flash partially blinded him. But a sudden bend rendered the bullet harmless, though it likewise disturbed the return blow, and the chief's hatchet, instead of

cleaving the young trader's skull, sunk deep into Ralph's shoulder, felling him like a log, senseless.

The next instant, the frantic mustang plunged into the cool pool, drinking greedily. The chief leaped to the ground, and limped to where the gold-hunters' horses were tied. He severed the rope that held El Gallo's horse, and leaping upon his back, pricked him on into the confused struggle, uttering his wild war-cry as though to animate his despairing braves.

The chief seemed to bear a charmed life. Though the blood flowed freely from half a dozen wounds, he fought on, striking down two men with his own hand. But the efforts of one man, brave as that one undeniably was, could not turn the tide of battle, and seeing that his braves were nearly all down, the chief gave the signal for retreat, setting the example himself, striking out over the prairie at full speed.

"After them—to horse, boys!" yelled El Gallo. "If one escapes he will bring the whole tribe upon us! After them!"

By this time the struggle was carried on beside the spring, the Apaches being carried thither by their starving horses. Four of the Indians copied the example of their chief, seizing upon the hunters' horses, and turned to flee. The gold-seekers, their firearms now empty, mounted and set out in hot pursuit. And then ensued a race for life or death.

Before two hundred yards were passed, El Gallo struck down the hindmost Apache, who had, unfortunately for himself, taken an animal wounded severely by a chance shot. But the chief and the three other red-skins held their vantage nobly.

There were not sound horses enough left for all the gold-hunters to follow in chase, and with considerable forethought, before looking to their own or their comrades' hurts, they secured the mustangs that crowded round the spring, after allowing them to drink their fill.

Cyril was one of those fortunate ones who escaped without a hurt, though he played a manful part in the fierce, quick fight. His first thought was for Ralph, and when he found him lying senseless, with that ugly gash in his shoulder, he believed him dead. But a little cold water, muddy though it now was, soon revived the lad, and Lucky Ike bandaged

his wound with the assurance that he would be all right in a day or two.

But there were four of the gold-hunters who would never set eyes upon the mountain of gold; three besides Roaring Tom Harper were slain outright.

It was after dark when the pursuers returned. Sonora Ben brought in one scalp, but the chief and two braves had distanced them. This fact rendered further stay at the oasis out of the question, and while some hastily buried their fellow comrades, the others prepared for a night journey. Two rude litters were made, to carry Ralph and Jack Homan, though the latter was evidently mortally wounded. Still he begged that they would not desert him, though he felt that he must die by the way. And then the party set forth from the oasis, riding the best animals, leading the others, carrying a good supply of water. Their only hope was to reach the mountain and break their trail before the Apaches could meet them.

CHAPTER VIII.

TRAPPING 'PATCHIES.

THE little cavalcade pressed rapidly on through the night. Quite two-thirds of the gold-hunters were wounded, some of them severely enough to have caused the death of an ordinary man twice over, yet not a word of complaint was heard as they followed the lead of Sonora Ben across the hot sands, through the still, sultry night.

Ralph Eaton seemed to suffer more than did Jack Homan, though his was a mere flesh wound in comparison. Indeed the hardy gold-seeker was rapidly sinking—the sands of life were well-nigh run. He lay in a stupor that closely resembled death.

Toward morning there came a change for the worse. Homan's mind gave way to wild delirium that gave him fictitious strength. Several times he nearly flung himself from the litter, shrieking aloud in broken sentences in which the

terrible jornada was mingled with the Indian fight and visions of the golden mountain.

At length El Gallo reluctantly ordered a halt, since Homan could no longer be managed in the litter while traveling, and the gold-seekers were not men to abandon a living comrade, even though touched by the hand of death.

As there was neither drink nor food at this spot, the animals were securely side-hoppled, in addition to having their lariats driven firmly into the sand. Otherwise there would be danger of their straying back to the oasis, where they had left such plenty.

Cyril lay beside Ralph, who was feverish; El Gallo and Sonora Ben watched beside the dying hunter, keeping his lips moist, watching for him to enter upon the long trail. The rest of the party, weary and jaded, with their recent terrible struggle for life in the desert, added to the fight at the oasis and the subsequent chase, flung themselves upon the sands and almost instantly fell sound asleep.

The ravings of the dying man gradually grew fainter and he seemed sinking into the lethargy that precedes death. The two men sat beside him, gloomily awaiting the result. The sense of hearing and touch alone aided them, for the increasing gloom that marked the approach of a new day, hid their comrade's face from their gaze.

"Boss," suddenly whispered Sonora Ben, "them critters seem powerful oneasy—jest lis'en!"

The next moment both men leaped erect, with a loud, warning cry that startled the gold-hunters from their slumbers. Their well-trained ears had caught the peculiar sound of a taut rope separating as though by the touch of a keen knife, and then one of the animals hobbled hastily away as though frightened.

"Injin deviltry, boy—look to y'ur weepens—gi' 'em the best ye got!" yelled Sonora Ben, boldly dashing forward through the picketed animals to the spot from whence had proceeded the suspicious sound.

The wild, thrilling war-whoop of the "Club" Apache rung forth clear and defiant, and a dusky figure leaped up from almost at Sonora Ben's feet and sprung lightly upon the back of a mustang. The old hunter discharged a hasty shot, but

the savage galloped on, yelling like a madman. At the same instant Sonora Ben received a heavy blow and dropped like a log, almost beneath the trampling hoofs of the terrified animals who plunged and snorted, trying to break their bonds.

For a few moments all was confusion. The gold-hunters had sprung erect, rifle in hand, but they had been awakened from a troubled sleep in which wild, fantastic visions prevailed, and for the moment they could scarce tell whether this wild tumult was reality, or the continuation of their sleeping thoughts.

In answer to the yell of the savage who had been discovered by Sonora Ben, other Indians charged in from the desert beyond, yelling, screeching, making as much uproar as possible, their evident object being to stampede the animals of the pale-faces. But, thanks to the double precaution taken, this attempt was unsuccessful, and almost ere the pale-faces could realize that they were attacked, the Indians had vanished—their yells were stilled—only the rapidly-retreating thud of their horses' hoofs could be heard.

It was some time before El Gallo could bring order out of the confusion, and then the gloom in the east was gradually fading before the light of the approaching day. Two bodies were found upon the ground—those of Sonora Ben and Lucky Ike, whose proverbial good-fortune had at length deserted him. He, as well as Sonora Ben, had been knocked down by the charge of the Club Apaches, but the old guide, more fortunate, had escaped with a few bruises, though he lay senseless for half an hour or more. It was found, too, that the spirit of poor Jack Homan had fled its earthly tenement during the excitement.

Two of the horses were missing, and half a dozen more had their lariats cut, but the well-planned *ruse* of the Apaches had failed, thanks to the precaution used by the whites. Only for the side-hopple, a stampede would have followed, and the gold-hunters would have been left afoot in the desert—only another term for *death*.

Not yet knowing the strength of their enemies, the adventurers clustered round their animals with ready weapons, expecting another and more desperate assault. But as the rosy light of day descended upon the level waste, their anxious

gaze could discover no enemy—the desert seemed deserted by all save themselves.

As soon as it was light enough, Sonora Ben began questioning the ground, like a hound seeking to regain a lost scent, and in a few minutes returned, a peculiar look resting on his weatherbeaten countenance.

“I reckon we mought es well make tracks, boss,” he said, quietly, throwing the saddle upon his mustang.

“What do you make out, Ben?” anxiously asked El Gallo.

“A heap—but I kin tell ye as we ride on. I want to think a liddle, anyhow. But the sooner we make the water, the better I’ll feel,” curtly replied the old scout.

Knowing from experience that the veteran must be humored, not driven, El Gallo gave the word to saddle, and once more the little cavalcade was moving over the barren waste. Ralph was still in his litter, but the other one, in addition to its former occupant, now held the mangled corse of Lucky Ike. It was almost certain that the Club Apaches would return to see what had been the result of their dash, and a grave, however artfully concealed, would be found and opened for the coveted scalp.

A trapper has all the horror of a full-blooded Indian for having his scalp insulted by an enemy, and the gold-hunters were doing as they would be done by—carrying the bodies with them until a better place of concealment was found.

“Have you thought long enough, now, Ben?” at length asked El Gallo, unable longer to restrain his curiosity.

“I reckon. D’y’ know who them cusses was, last night?”

“No—only they must have been a small party, or we would have heard more from them.”

“They was jest three critters, in all—the same imps as we missed yesterday. But one on ’em’s a hoss, *he* is!”

El Gallo stared in mute surprise. Sonora Ben chuckled.

“It’s true—twenty mountaineers double-dared by three dirty ‘Patchies—he! he! hee! ho! ho! hoo!” and the veteran laughed as though his sides would split.

“But, if you are right, why are they hanging around us,

instead of going to their village for help to avenge their comrades?"

"Mebbe they would, ef we was headin' any other way, but 's long's we're takin' a straight shoot fer thar town, I reckon they think it's no more'n perlite they should keep us comp'ny," grunted Sonora Ben.

"Then you think they belong to—"

"To the same town *you're* eetchin' to git inside o'—or what's them deeds fer as you've got in the possible sack you're so mighty keerful of? Yes, boss, they're Club Apash, an' from thar town you kin see the top o' the gold mountain. So you see, we're goin' thar way, anyhow. Then the chief—I reckon you've heard of him—thar's few atween the Heely* an' the Rio Grande as *hasn't*—ol' 'Game Leg.'"

"El Coxo!" echoed El Gallo, in surprise.

"No less. As I was sayin', Game Leg hangs out thar—he's second chief now, I b'lieve. He's durned proud, bein' a good warrior, an' would hate like pizen to go back thar 'thout any thin' to show fer his lot o' braves, nur he won't, ef so be he kin help hisself. 'Twouldn't sound so bad ef he could kerry the news 'at we was left afoot in the sand. The 'Patchies 'd count that es a fair offset, sence they could gobble us up then, jest es they choosed."

"Then you think—"

"I'll sw'ar it, ef you want me to. I say that Game Leg 'll foller us up fer another chaine at our critters, an' ef you let me pull the ropes jest es I want, we'll git to the gold mountain 'thout any livin' 'Patchies knowin' of it, an' you kin work *your* plan at the town to suit y'urself," tersely replied Sonora Ben.

"But are you *sure* this is El Coxo?"

"Sure as that a No. 2 Newhouse 'll hold a beaver when he treddle slips. I thort I re-cognized the varmint when we was chasin' him, but a bit sence I made sure. You know he hooked your critter. *That* was one o' the outfit as run through us, last night. Game Leg was the varmint as slipped in to cut loose enough o' our animiles to make the stampede sure—I don't reckon he counted on 'em bein' side-hobbled, too—an' I found his trail, plain es day. You know his right ieg

drags, the foot lookin' like a stump, though his toes air doubled under the sole, an' that trail ain't made by many 'Patchies. He's jest a lettle hell on wheels, is this same Game Leg!"

"I've never known you to yelp on the wrong trail yet, Ben, and I believe you're right now. So you can act just as you think best, and I will let the boys know that they are to look to you as their leader, at least for the present," returned El Gallo, evidently convinced.

Sonora Ben guided the party on over the desert wastes at a steady, regular pace that quickly devoured space, only halting for a few minutes at noon, to give the animals a few mouthfuls of water. The men drank sparingly, warned by past experience how very uncertain desert travel is, and they kept each man about a quart of water in their gourds, though expecting to strike the river by sunset. During the day nothing was seen of the Apaches, though Sonora Ben declared El Coxo was dogging them, resolved upon making another attempt to stampede their animals before showing himself at the village as a shamefully defeated leader. And the old guide matured his plans, arraying every detail with perfect faith in his own reasoning.

It was late in the afternoon when the range of high, rock-crowned hills showed plainly above the sand swells, and Sonora Ben declared that not only would they find plenty of good water and grass, at the base of the range, but it was in this same stream that the ill-fated party, of which he alone had escaped massacre, picked up nuggets of pure gold that ought to have satisfied any man, and probably would have, only for their sighting the glittering mountain of gold.

In high glee the gold-seekers drained their water-gourds, and pressed on their jaded animals eager to gain the golden river that was so near the haven of their wishes. The horses also seemed to catch the spirit and pressed on with fresh vigor, though it is probable their views were far more sensible, and likely to be gratified.

"What is your plan, Ben?" asked El Gallo, at length.

Sonora Ben, feeling his own importance, as perhaps was only natural, hereupon delivered himself of a long, prosy explanation, which may be briefly summed up as follows.

It would be after dark when they arrived at the river. Ben with half a dozen picked men and all the extra animals, were to go into camp at a point he had selected for his purpose, while the main body were to keep on up the river until they came to a little side valley, where they must *cache* themselves. Ben believed he would risk a tiny bit of fire, just to give the Apaches an idea of his location, and then extinguish it, as though it had only been kindled to prepare a sup and bite for the wounded men. The animals were to be secured beside straggling thicket that grew close to the high bank of the river, and the Indians, if they came, would fancy the remainder hidden by the saplings. A few bunches of grass, covered with blankets, would serve for the tired pale-faces. By crouching under cover, Ben felt confident that he could either wipe out or secure the Apaches.

Every one of El Gallo's objections were met and overruled by the guide, until, though far from satisfied, he was fain to keep silent and let the obstinate man gang his ain gait.

The river was reached sometime after dark, the journey of some ninety miles having been made in about twenty-six hours. Sonora Ben soon directed the way to a steep trail that led down to the river's edge, and the horses were soon greedily drinking their fill. Then Ben gave El Gallo explicit directions how to find the valley spoken of, and the company separated.

Ben deliberately set his trap, and then composed himself to patient waiting in a clump of bushes that the Indians must pass in order to gain the spot where the animals were tethered, while Monte Pete and two others ensconced themselves in a similar ambush, in case the Apaches should come from down the river. Thus they would be taken between two fires, making escape almost impossible. In case they should have fallen in with re-enforcements, the trappers could steal away under cover of the attempted stampede, and thus regain their comrades. For this reason it was that Sonora Ben had only baited his trap with the extra animals so that, were the Indians successful, the loss would be trifling. And then if the worst came, the gold-seekers would have time to retreat or seek an advantageous position for giving battle before the enemy could read the riddle correctly.

It was not until near two hours after midnight that the gold-seekers were rewarded for their silent, cheerless watch. But then Ben quietly touched Yankee Dan upon the arm, and nodded out upon the open space before them. A faint, almost imperceptible shadow seemed gliding along the ground. That shadow was an Indian—was El Coxo, the Game Leg.

The spy did not advance much further, but having carefully reconnoitered the browsing horses, turned and glided stealthily away. The ambushed men waited further developments impatiently. Sonora Ben, by a faint chirp—the preliminary note of the tree toad—warned Monte Pete that the game was afoot.

A few minutes later El Coxo returned, accompanied by two braves, all of them clutching bared knives and hatchets. Their object was plain. They had resolved to strike at least one blow for vengeance, not daring to return to their village without a scalp to offset their heavy loss.

As the Indians came abreast the ambush, Sonora Ben raised his rifle, and the three men selected their victims. As the weapons exploded, the hunters leaped forward, knife in hand, but their work was done. Three bodies lay writhing upon the ground. The struggles of two of them were speedily stilled in death, but the other—El Coxo—attempted to strike Sonora Ben with his hatchet. The veteran quickly disarmed him, and then, passing one hand over his head, ordered Monte Pete to bind him tightly.

"The light fooled me—I aimed at his head, but the lead on'y 'greased' the critter," he muttered, angrily.

"Shall I lend 'im one?" suggested Yankee Dan significantly.

"No—not yit. Mebbe the boss 'd like to hev a talk wi' the varmint. Come—h'iste him onto a critter—our work's did hyar. Thar's no tellin' what ears mought 'a' heard us burn powder, an' I reckon we'd better jine the rest o' the boys," added Sonora Ben.

The Apaches were scalped, and their bodies tied upon a couple of the mules, since it would not do to leave them where a passing friend might find the bodies and raise the avengers too soon. The chief, now rapidly recovering his senses, was bound beyond the possibility of escape, and Sonora

Ben led the way to the valley in which El Gallo had *cached*. A signal at the mouth was given and answered, and then the gold-hunters were reunited.

"What d'y' think o' ol' Ben's durned nonsense, *now*, boss?" chuckled the guide, maliciously, as he faced El Gallo. "Didn't it come out jest's I said? See—hyar's two skelps—an' thar's a live one. Tole ye 'twas Game Leg."

"Ha! and alive! this is more than I dared hoped for," excitedly replied El Gallo, pressing forward to where the captive stood, erect, yet held by two men. "You need not hold him, boys—his hands are bound, and I don't fear his running away," added El Gallo, motioning the trappers to stand aside.

He placed both hands upon the chief's shoulders, and gazed keenly into his eyes. The savage returned glance for glance, his features wearing a cold, haughty expression.

"You don't remember me, El Coxo," quietly said the white, yet in a voice that was frightful in its intensity, speaking the Club Apache dialect. "Yet we have met before. You have struck my people—and you have my mark upon your breast. I am El Gallo."

"I hear a coyote yelp," sneered the chief.

"A coyote can bite, too. But see—you have a great medicine in your town, named Melapanche."

El Coxo started slightly, and made no reply. El Gallo added, his voice trembling with rising anger and hatred:

"You have a tongue yet—tell me, or I will tear it out by the roots and force it down your throat!"

"El Gallo is a big brave—he threatens a prisoner, whose hands are tied. El Coxo is a chief—he does not understand the Coyote tongue."

"Tell me what I ask, or by the Great Spirit above, I will tear off your scalp and send you home to your squaws in petticoats!" snarled El Gallo, drawing a knife and holding it at the chief's throat.

El Coxo, with one mighty effort, burst asunder his bonds as though they had been but wisps of straw, and wrested the knife from El Gallo's hand. The white chief leaped back, drawing a revolver. El Coxo laughed harshly, then lifted the heavy bowie-knife and drove it to the very hilt

in his broad breast. Loud and shrill his death-yell echoed through the hills. Then he sunk to the ground, dead, by his own hand.

"True grit, *he* was, ef he was a Patchie," muttered Sonora Ben, admiringly. "But he's got a good skelp, an' I owe him a old grudge anyhow, so hyar goes fer a little h'ar-liftin'!"

CHAPTER IX.

EL GALLO AS A GREAT MEDICINE.

THAT night El Gallo and Sonora Ben conversed long and earnestly, in cautious tones that could enlighten no ears save their own. With the first glimmer of day, the chief bade the adventurers keep close in the little valley until he and Sonora Ben should return from their scout, and especially to avoid running around in quest of gold, since to be discovered by an Apache now would be equivalent to death.

"Hold your patience for a few hours, my lads," added El Gallo, as several of the sunburnt brows clouded. "Before this time to-morrow, Ben says ye shall lay hand upon the gold mountain! Think of *that*, and grumble no more because a few paltry scales of gold must be left here."

"The boss says true, boyees," added Sonora Ben. "Ye shall see the mountain o' gold—an' ef *that* ain't enough o' the metal fer ye, why I'll agree to show ye a *cache* whar ye kin pick up chunks o' the pure stuff in do'nicks the size o' y'ur fist. So hunker down an' smoke y'ur pipes in peace on-tel we gits back."

Sonora Ben turned and followed El Gallo, who had, in addition to his weapons, a stout bear-skin sack of considerable size. The scouts passed down the trail, on foot, pausing for a few moments at the spot where Sonora Ben had set his man-trap with such success, then continuing their course down the river for nearly two miles.

Descending a trail that led to the river brink, the men plunged in, holding their fire-arms—with the exception of

their rifles, which were first carefully hidden in a clump of bushes—above water while they swam across the narrow stream. Climbing up the intricate trail, Sonora Ben presently turned aside, following a narrow ledge until it widened into a platform some twenty feet square, fringed upon the edge by vine-covered bushes.

An hour later they emerged, but what a marvelous change was wrought in El Gallo! Instead of the handsome, gayly dressed Spanish cavalier, he now appeared a fantastically arrayed savage in all the glory of paint, feathers and curiously embroidered garments. His face was clean shorn, and, like his entire person, stained a deep, regular copper hue. His long black hair was straightened with grease, and hung far down his back. A feathered head-dress rested upon his brow. A daintily embroidered medicine-bag hung upon his breast, beside a curiously carved pipe with jointed stem. The only weapon visible was a Navy revolver, thrust in the belt, at his side, but two others, of a smaller pattern, were hidden beneath the loose tunic.

The men parted without words as though every thing had been arranged beforehand, Sonora Ben swimming back to where the rifles had been left, while El Gallo quickly ascended the rugged range. After an hour steady climbing, he paused and gazed down upon the scene below him.

A broad fertile plain, surrounded upon all sides by ragged, rocky mountains. Near the center, a large collection of strangely shaped buildings, some of stone, the majority of adobe and wood. Thousands of horses, mules, cattle and sheep graze upon the rich grass along the clear, shallow river. It is the village of the warlike but superstitious Club Apache.

El Gallo closely examined a yellow, stained piece of parchment. It seemed to be a rudely drawn map or chart. As though satisfied, he turned to the right, clambering over masses of rocks, leaping broad fissures with a promptness that betokened a total absence of fear. Nor had El Gallo a drop of cowardly blood in his veins, else he would never have thought of entering the Apache town, where no name was better known, no man more dreaded than El Gallo.

Regaining the trail he had momentarily strayed from, El

Gallo strode on for a mile or more. Then he put some substance in his mouth. A few moments after he was challenged by the sentinel. For answer El Gallo opened his mouth and blew a cloud of smoke and fire toward the Apache. In terror he shrunk back, and recognizing the insignia of a medicine-man, prostrated himself. El Gallo did not pause, but strode on, leaving a train of smoke behind him. His approach was signaled to the town, and instantly all was commotion, hundreds of savages pressing forth to view the sight, though giving the medicine-man a wide berth; all save two Indian conjurors and the head chief, Wakara.

El Gallo, having adroitly replenished his mouth, drove back the conjuror with fire, and then addressed Wakara. In stilted language—for he had, for what purpose the reader will doubtless guess, made a study of the Club Apache dialect—he announced himself as a humble child of the sun who had been sent to announce the return of Montezuma, and to prepare for his arrival by uniting all of his descendants in one brotherly band, to heal all feuds between the red children, when their ancient glory and renown would be restored.

Wakara listened with bowed head, but El Gallo could see a twinkle of disbelief in his snaky eyes.

“Our father speaks words that are sweet in our ears, but the Club Apaches have listened to the words of our brothers, the Navajoes, who have often predicted the return of the Sun God, on such a day; but the day passed by without his coming. Some of my people will find it hard to believe—they will say this is another mistake.”

“That was because the Navajoes were blind, and acted like fools. The Sun God has made many new and wonderful weapons with which his children may sweep their enemies from the earth. He sent some to a chief of the Navajoes, but they sold them for fire-water to the bad white-face, El Gallo. He planted them, and now can pick them from his own garden. Will the Club Apaches be as foolish? If so, then the Sun God will hide his face from them forever.”

“When will he send us these presents?”

“See—here is one, that you may see what it is like,” and El Gallo drew the Navy revolver.

One of the wolfish Indian dogs was squatted at a little dis-

tance, and taking quick aim, El Gallo shot it through the heart. Then without lowering his hand, he emptied the remaining barrels into the carcass.

"Look, and you will find the six holes in the dog. But that is nothing—you can use this weapon forever and it will kill all your enemies," said El Gallo, as Wakara curiously examined the riddled carcass.

"But look—you shall see that I am what I say, a child of the Sun, and no mortal like yourself. See—these are the fangs of this wonderful weapon. Bite them—they are hard. They killed the dog—they will kill a man. But they cannot kill me. You shall try it; and then you can tell your people that you speak with a straight tongue."

While thus talking, El Gallo dextrously reloaded the revolver, as Wakara believed putting in the leaden bullets he—the chief—had examined. Then, when loaded and cocked, El Gallo forced the weapon into the trembling hand of the chief, and bade him fire. Afraid to show cowardice before his assembled people, Wakara shut his eyes and drew the trigger. When he opened them, El Gallo stood before him, unharmed, holding the marked bullet betwixt his teeth. And to cap the climax, El Gallo took the pistol and shot two more dogs dead. The Club Apaches shrunk back, trembling with superstitious awe.

"You have wise medicine-men," continued the hunter, following up his advantage. "Let them try which is the most powerful—their medicine or mine. Let them try their knives or let your best and strongest warrior bend his bow against my breast, let him strike me with his lance or battle-club. The weapon will shiver to pieces, his arm will crumble into dust. And see; I can not touch my own life, because it belongs to my master. Look!" and with these words El Gallo plucked the long, slender knife from Wakara's girdle and turning the point toward his own breast, struck with his full force; the blade shivered like a bit of glass.

"You see that my tongue is straight. But you have a great medicine here, besides me. You call her Malapanche. She is the one chosen by the Sun God to restore the light of the Club Apaches. And further, Montezuma gave me a message that I must deliver in her ear alone. It is for your sake that

I say this, for were mortal being to hear one whisper of that message before the Sun God wills that it should be proclaimed from the mountain-top, he would be turned to stone forevermore !”

In apparent indifference El Gallo stood, but beneath that impenetrable mask, what a hell of emotion worked ! Upon the answer depended all his hopes—yet he had not taken this bold step without due reflection. He believed that his “magic,” added to his confident tone, would succeed in overpowering any scruples the chief and his people might entertain as to the propriety of intrusting their sacred prophetess in company with such a being as he seemed.

“The child of the Sun has spoken. Let not the ears of the Club Apaches be closed to his words, or the angry breath of the master shall blow upon ye until ye fall down and change into the grains of sand beneath thy feet !”

These words, loud, commanding and slowly spoken, came from the empty air above Wakara’s head ! Hearing the sound, all eyes were naturally turned toward the point from whence it proceeded, and El Gallo could scarce choke down a laugh as he noted the effect of his ventriloquial effort, but bowed his head just in time.

The two conjurors who had remained near Wakara, loth to confess their inferiority to this new medicine-man by retreating, as their fears dictated, now sunk to the ground, trembling, quivering with terror, expecting instant death. The example seemed contagious. The Apaches prostrated themselves, giving full sway to their superstition.

Wakara alone stood erect, and he dared not trust his voice to speak, but tremblingly motioned El Gallo to follow him. Scarcely less unnerved, the gold-hunter obeyed, muffling his face in a fold of his tunic. With ludicrous haste the Apaches scrambled aside, leaving a wide passage for the chief and his terrible guest.

Wakara led the way to the main building in the town—a large, substantial edifice of stone, evidently used as a temple. A narrow flight of stone steps led up to an arched doorway, through which gleamed the faint rays of a lighted lamp or a fire. At the foot of this flight, Wakara paused and intimated

that he dared go no further, without the permission of the great Prophetess.

"She expects me—the Sun God has told her of my coming. But wait; here is the fire-bow. Take and plant it deep in the richest ground you can find beside the river. See that the spot is carefully guarded, night and day. In three suns a small tree will show its head. In three moons, that tree will bear fire-bows for all your braves, and then who can stand before Wakara? No one—not even the terrible pale-face, *El Gallo*!"

These last words were spoken loudly and distinctly, as *El Gallo* handed Wakara the revolver. He had caught sound of a light footstep above, and as the chief bowed his head over the marvelous fire-bow, *El Gallo* glanced upward, making a rapid, peculiar gesture.

"See, the prophetess comes to meet the bearer of Montezuma's message. Go now, my brother, lest your ears should catch a whisper of it and you be turned to stone. Go—tell the Club Apaches that though their eyes may remain open, they must not use their ears."

Wakara seemed only too glad to escape from the mysterious medicine-man, and glided rapidly away. He did not hear the rapidly uttered words that seemed to be uttered from the stones close beside the Prophetess.

"Give no token of fear or surprise—utter no alarm, as you value the safety of your loved ones. 'Tis I—*your husband*—who speaks. Be brave, and all will be well. I come to rescue or to die with you, my darling!"

At the first words the tall, pale woman staggered back, and only for the friendly door-pillar, would have sunk to the floor. But then though ghastly pale, she seemed to nerve herself, and as *El Gallo* slowly ascended the steps, she met him with outward composure. Conscious that hundreds of eyes were upon them, *El Gallo* went through a complicated pantomime concluding with blowing a stream of fire and smoke to each of the cardinal points, one downward, a last and longer column upward. Then Prophetess and medicine-man entered the temple together, leaving the wonder-stricken Apaches to feast their eyes upon the stone walls.

"Inez—my precious—are we alone—is there any one within hearing?" whispered El Gallo, eagerly.

"Alone—this is our home—mine and our children—"

The long-severed husband and wife were locked in each other's arms. 'Twas a holy moment—let the curtain fall.

An hour later four persons were seated in a small, square apartment, lighted by a rude lamp that was suspended from the ceiling; El Gallo, his wife and two daughters.

The latter seemed to regard him with awe, stealing covert glances at his face, their eyes falling whenever they met his.

Little wonder, since, for ten long years they had not met; only for the teachings of their mother, even his memory would have faded from their minds.

"The hand of God was in it," solemnly uttered El Gallo. "Your messenger was stabbed in a drunken brawl, within two months of the time when he reached his people. But he lived long enough to impart his trust to a worthy priest, who carefully wrote it down, word for word. He sought for me, but could learn nothing. This was not strange, since I believed you all had perished in the fire—for we found human bones in the ashes when I returned, and a heavy rain had washed out the trail. Pepe, though scalped, I found alive, and with his dying breath he told me that the Club Apaches had wrought the ruin before me. From that hour I lived only for vengeance. You must have heard of El Gallo; the Apache tribes have good cause to know me. My real name was forgotten—I was known only as El Gallo. No wonder, then, that Father Augustin could not find me.

"Less than a year ago, the Apaches made a raid on the valley around Soccoro. Don Santiago Kirker and his scalp hunters were sent in pursuit. I was one of the band then. In stopping at Soccoro to gain what information we could, I questioned a dying priest. It was father Augustin. He felt that he was about to depart, and, little suspecting what vital interest his story had for me, begged me to accept his trust and endeavor to find Don Claude Manneville. It was *your* note—and then, for the first time I learned that you were living—or had been living, seven years before. Well, I gathered a body of men—and here I am. I find you—my chil

dren—alive; can you wonder that I half believe this all a dream, from which I will awaken all too soon?"

"Alas! dear Claude," sighed the woman, burying her face upon El Gallo's breast, "my selfishness has proved your ruin—I have brought you here, only to die!"

"Have I lived since that day—since I wept over what I believed your bones? Death together would be easier than life separated! But, why talk thus? We will escape; I have blinded the eyes of the stupid Apaches; I can make them tremble at a nod. You have not forgotten the tricks that I used to amuse you with in our happy home. I have improved them since," laughed El Gallo.

"You they may fear to detain, but they will not allow me to leave this building. I won their respect first by the few simple tricks that you taught me, and they made me assistant to their great medicine-man. When he died, he gave me his mantle and rod. He told the Apaches that while I remained with them, they would be powerful and wise. But if I ever departed, ruin and desolation would be their lot. If I pass yonder door, I am followed by a chosen guard."

"I *will* free you—you and my other jewels here—and that, too, before another day."

CHAPTER X.

THE MOUNTAIN OF GOLD.

"GENTLEMEN," abruptly said Sonora Ben, wheeling his horse half around so as to completely block up the narrow trail they had been following through the rugged range, "right hyer we stop an' hev a lettle confab, afore we go any further."

The men crowded up as close to the speaker as the nature of the ground would admit, wondering not a little at the old man's resolute though quiet tones.

The sun was nearly setting. The day had been spent in weary, even dangerous climbing and descending through the broken and rugged range. Upon horseback, their progress had been much slower than that of El Gallo.

"Boyees," continued Sonora Ben, "you know what I promised you down yon'; I said I'd show ye the mount'in o' gold afore another day. So I will— Shet up, thar, you Monte Pete! Be ye crazy, that ye squeel like a hurt painter when thar may be a thousan' Apash' 'ithin hearin'? Hold y'ur yaup tell I'm through.

"I reckon you'd orter know, by this time, ef I'm a feller what goes back on his word. I hain't never done so yit, an' I'm too old to begin a new trail now. So jest you lissen to, what I've got to say, an' consider it swore to.

"You all know how my pards, that time, lost thar skelps, when they hed thar hands well-nigh on the gold mountain, by actin' like durned, or'nary greenhorns, 'stead o' true mountain-men. This hyar outfit hain't agwine to do the like, es long es I kin stop 'em. I say ye shall lay grips on the mountain, afore sun-up, ef so be ye heed me. Look—see this 'volver. Now the man as tries to go ahead ontel I say so, gits a bit o' lead chock through his brain-pan! I sw'ar it, by the 'tarnal!"

"What d'y' mean, Sonora Ben?" slowly demanded Monte Pete.

"Jest this: from the clump o' peenyon, yender, you kin clap eyes on the gold— Hold! Stop, or I plug ye!" and the black muzzle stared Monte Pete full in the eye. "Afore ye go a step further, promise me 'at ye'll wait untel dark afore ye try to git to the mountain; thar's time a-plenty. Remember the Apash' town is nigh, an' they've got sharp eyes. Let 'em see ye crossin' the level, as like they mought—then good-by skelps. Promise, an' then we'll go up on the ridge, whar ye kin feed y'ur eyes on the gloriousest sight ye ever clapped peepers on."

"You're right, old man, an' hyar's one as 'll back ye tel the last chip," quietly uttered Monte Pete. "Them as buck ag'inst you, in this deal, must see me, too."

These words seemed to decide the gold-seekers, and with one accord they promised to be guided by Sonora Ben in all matters. Then the old man cleared the path, and after a few minutes of tough climbing, the adventurers breathlessly gazed upon the wonderful object that had lured them so far—for which they had suffered and dared so much.

The first glance dazzled them; more than one was forced to close his watering eyes, as though he had been gazing at the noonday sun.

Across the level, fertile valley rose another chain of mountains. But only for one of these had the adventurers eyes. It stood a little in advance of the others. The red rays of the declining sun lighted up the top, or nearly one-fourth of the mountain. The sunbeams were reflected in a thousand brilliant jets. The GOLD MOUNTAIN was before them, in all its burning splendor.

Sonora Ben closely watched his comrades, with cocked revolver, resolved to execute his threat rather than risk the failure of their long journey now by a foolish haste. But the trappers seemed stupefied by the sight. Their wildest dreams fell far short of what they now beheld. And long breaths were drawn, as the voice of Sonora Ben broke the silence.

"Ye see now 'at I warn't yarnin', boyees—thar stan's the gold mountain as I've told ye about. You kin see fer yourselves. Is thar enough o' the stuff thar to satisfy ye?"

"Kin it be all gold? It don't seem possible!"

"I kain't s'war it is, 'cause I never telched it, as ye know. Ef 'tain't, what makes it shine so? Still, at the wust—s'posin' we be fooled—I kin show you a *cache* whar we kin load two mules down wi' the pure stuff, what the boys throw'd away when they sighted yon hill."

In like manner the gold-hunters conversed as they waited, with what patience they could summon, for the sun to hide itself, and night to lend its friendly cover for their safe advance. Wearily enough the minutes dragged.

But all things must have an end, and at length Sonora Ben led the way down the winding trail. The steep descent was dangerous enough in broad day, and was doubly increased now, in the faint, uncertain light. But what cared they for that, when such a prize awaited them?

Night had fairly settled over the earth, when the adventurers gained the level ground. Their animals were jaded and hungry, but no one thought of them, save to use them in reaching the golden goal the more speedily. Knife-points and lariat-ends were freely applied, and the gold-seekers rapidly crossed the valley, or narrow plain."

And then, leaping to the ground, the hunters clambered madly over the bowlders that strewed the base of the wonderful mountain, unheeding the awkward falls that bruised and tore their flesh, thinking only of grasping the golden treasure before some enchantment should cause it to fade away from before their eyes.

The sharp clink of hatchets striking the yellow rocks—the strained exclamations as great flakes gave way to the force of their heavy blows—and then came a frightful stillness.

The terrible truth burst upon their minds almost simultaneously. The gold mountain was a myth—a delusive snare. The yellow stuff in their hands was worthless. Instead of gold, it was naught but glittering scales of *selenite*!

The discovery was terrible. More than one of the men sunk beneath it, like dead persons. Others burst into a frenzy of frightful blasphemy, cursing themselves—even their God. To think that for this worthless stuff they had traveled so far—had dared such peril—endured such privations—suffered the agonies of a thousand deaths! Truly, it was a heart-sickening blow!

“Boyees, don’t look at me like that; I cain’t bear it no longer! Es true es the good Lord above hears me, I didn’t dream o’ this; I thort, like you did when on the rise yender, that this was the raal stuff. It’s es tough a blow to me es it kin be to you. Then don’t look at me like that—I’d rather you’d plug me through the heart at once’t, I would,” muttered Sonora Ben, dejectedly, his head hanging low.

“You’re not to blame, old man,” impulsively cried Cyril Black, grasping the veteran’s hand and pressing it warmly. “Would you have come this far, unless you had believed this stuff was genuine? None but a fool would think of blaming you!”

“Thank ye, lad; thank ye fer that! It’s but nat’ral fer the boyees to fee’ hard at me, sence ’twar my story as brung ’em hyar. I don’t blame ’em, though ’tis hard to b’ar sech black looks—to be cussed like they cuss me. But mebbe I kin make amends. I told ye of a *cache* I know’d on—I reckon thar’s good two mule-loads—I *know* it’s the stuff, sence I’ve handled it myself. I’ll show you this *cache*, boys—I

won't ax none on it myself—you kin shar' it atween ye—on'y don't cuss the old man when he don't deserve it. I cain't b'ar it now. 'Pears like this thing hes knocked me eendways. I cain't think—I cain't sca'cely breathe—my blood feels fainty, like. I don't think you'd cuss me so, boyees, ef ye know'd what a tough lick this hes bin to me," and Sonora Ben sunk to the ground like one in a maze.

The old man's dejection seemed to touch the better feelings of the gold-seekers, far more deeply than would have been the case had he met their curses and charges of treachery with bitter words of indignant denial. Truly Sonora Ben must have received a terrible shock to thus subdue him—at any other time he would have replied with curse for curse, have cut short the charge of treachery with a pistol bullet or knife-thrust.

Thus, when Sonora Ben sunk to the ground and covered his face with his trembling hands, a sudden change came over the gold-hunters; they calmed down, and even glanced shamefacedly at each other. Monte Pete was the first one to acknowledge his wrong, and seized one of Ben's hands as he poured out a unique apology, profusely garnished with oaths and card-playing metaphors. The others followed suit. In a wonderfully short time the storm was quelled, and, queerly though it may sound, the men seemed to forget their great disappointment in asking questions about Sonora Ben's *cache*. From a mountain of pure, solid gold, down to a mule-load!

"I'll show ye, boyees—now ye act more like true mountain-men. 'Tain't fur from hyar—some there mile. Ketch up the critters; thar's a good *cache* for them too."

"But s'posin' sumbody's found the *cache* afore us?" suggested Yankee Dan, his face lengthening.

"'Twould take a keener nose'n your'n, Yankee Dan, for that! No, I was fooled in the cursed yaller stuff hyar, jes es you fellers was, but ef I don't show ye gold enough to satisfy the wust on ye, then call me a yaller-skin—which is wuss'n pizen."

The gold-hunters quickly caught up their animals, and mounting, rode briskly through the starlit night after the old guide, who had by this time fully recovered his usual spirits. Indeed, all the men showed how well used they were to the

tricks and caprices of Dame Fortune, since they could think and even speak of the deceptive yellow mountain without cursing.

Winding through the broken hills for an hour or more, Sonora Ben at length drew rein beside a foaming, roaring stream. From this spot, in daylight, the glittering crest of the yellow mountain was visible. From here the ill-fated band of trappers had started upon their mad rush, that ended in death. And here, then, was Sonora Ben's *cache*.

The party had paused near the foot of a small waterfall. Around this, upon both sides of the stream, lay a beautiful, fertile, miniature valley. The animals greedily cropped the rich, juicy grass. The trappers pressed around Sonora Ben with questions, and when he evaded these, they scattered and sought for the *cache*. The veteran chuckled silently, but did not speak.

Slipping aside, he hastily stripped to the buff, and then gliding forward, dove into the circular basin that had been hollowed out of the rock foundation by the action of falling waters through the bygone ages. Startled by the plash, the adventurers flocked to the spot. The pool seemed agitated only by the descending waters, but then a dark ball suddenly parted the veil of water, and Sonora Ben flung a small object to land, uttering a triumphant laugh.

In the scramble Monte Pete seized the object, and held it up in the dim light of the stars. It was a nugget of gold! This was the first fruit of Sonora Ben's *cache*!

A wild cheer broke from the adventurers at this discovery, and only ceased when Sonora Ben cursed them for forgetting that they were in the Apache country. Even at that time there was no saying that they were beyond ear-shot. And once let the Indians learn of their invasion, little leisure would be given them for hunting gold.

The old guide's angry caution restored the trappers to something like reason, though they one and all began to strip, eager to rifle the *cache* of its golden treasure. Yankee Dan was one of the first to plunge in. He dove awkwardly, and almost immediately rose to the surface, floundering wildly, calling for help as well as he could in his half strangled state. He had forgotten that he was unable to swim! From this

incident, the reader can imagine the excitement that possessed the party.

Yankee Dan was rescued without any particular difficulty, and then contented himself with gathering up the nuggets flung him by his more skilled comrades.

It was a curious scene, these naked athletes plunging beneath the foaming surface, to reappear through the glistening sheet of water, bearing a valuable nugget, or else fetching up a worthless pebble, to be greeted with derisive cheers. And for an hour this scene continued, but then, as their ardor cooled in a degree, their habits of precaution returned, and several of the men were detailed to act as sentinels, posted upon the points of higher ground around, while the others worked more deliberately at emptying the *cache* of its golden store.

CHAPTER XI.

THROWING SUN-DUST IN THE APACHES' EYES.

"Now Inez," said El Gallo, "we must settle upon our plan for blinding these Apaches. Of course we must fully understand each other, though you must outwardly seem afraid of or reluctant to work with me, or the rascals may suspect something. You are sure of the cave, in the hill, yonder?"

"Yes—the man by whom I sent my message, pointed it out to me one day. It was by using this that he managed to pass the outer guards unseen."

"Can you show it to me, from here?"

"From the outer door, yes—that is, the ledge before it. The entrance is hidden behind a square boulder," and with these words the Prophetess glided toward the entrance.

"Be careful—there are plenty of curious eyes upon these walls, I doubt not. Keep back in the shadow. You see yonder dead pinon? Just above it is a ledge—nearly square, like the top of a table. The cave is there."

When El Gallo had satisfied himself of the location, they withdrew once more and resumed their planning. There was

no particular haste, as El Gallo did not care about reaching the cave before the sun was setting, and it still lacked several hours of that point.

An hour later, El Gallo slowly descended the steps of the temple, and strode toward the spot where he distinguished the broad, burly figure of Wakara. All save the chief gave way as the strange medicine-man advanced, smoke and fire streaming from his mouth, curling in wreaths around his head. Wakara, too, seemed less assured than at the first interview. This sun-messenger's medicine must be very powerful, since he issued alive and unharmed from an interview with Melapanche that had been, in a measure forced upon her.

El Gallo flung back his head and shot a ball of fire high up into the air, then, after a few rapid passes, commenced pulling yards and yards of brilliant hued ribbons from his mouth, until Wakara's neck was hung thickly with them.

Satisfied with the effect of this bit of by-play, El Gallo addressed the chief.

"The children of my brother are very happy in having such a wise medicine-woman to show them the trail their moccasins should follow. Melapanche is now talking with the Great Spirit. If she receives a favorable answer, then will she obey the message of the Sun God."

"What is this message?" hastily asked Wakara, then shrinking back as though frightened by his own temerity.

"Three suns from now, you shall hear—but ask it not now, unless you are weary of leading the Club Apaches to battle. See! Melapanche comes!" added El Gallo, turning toward the temple with an air of still deeper solemnity, if that be possible.

A moment later the Prophetess appeared at the head of the flight of stairs, her hair floating nearly to her feet, arrayed in the grotesque garb of her office, upholding the serpent-encircled wand as if to command attention.

"Children of the Club Apache! hearken unto the words of the Great Spirit, which he puts into the mouth of Melapanche. Listen; and woe be unto those who forget or fail to obey the commands of the Manitou.

"The Sun God has awakened from his long sleep. He looks down from the Spirit Land, and he sees his red children

divided into tribes, where brothers strike their fathers, where fathers strike their sons. He sees that the time has come when he must return to his people, or else they will soon pass away from the face of the earth. He looks around for a wise chief and a brave tribe who can tell the difference between wise words and foolish words. He sees the Club Apaches, ruled by the great and wise Wakara. His search ends here. He knows he can not do better, though he spent fifty moons in searching the earth.

"Children. The Sun God has sent a messenger to the Club Apache. Listen well to the words he utters, for they are put into his mouth by our great father. He will tell you what the Sun God said. Let the Apaches obey his bidding—let them do just as the Sun child directs, or his father will turn aside from the Club Apaches and with an angry breath, blow them from the face of the earth and make his home forever more with the womanly Navajoes."

The Prophetess ceased speaking, and the eyes of the assembled savages turned instinctively toward El Gallo, who stood with lowly bent head, as though in a reverie. As the clear tones of Melapanche died away, a deep, sepulchral voice sounded from the empty air above the chief:

"Let my son speak. Woe to the Club Apaches if they do not listen well—if they do not obey the will of the Sun God! Let them give my son what he asks; let them free his trail of all obstacles, and the Sun God will smile upon them and call them his favorite children!"

The Apaches heard these words with indescribable awe. The words came from the air above, where they could distinguish naught, and being perfectly ignorant of ventriloquism, the marvel that they were deeply impressed.

"Father," spoke El Gallo, in his natural tone, "they can hear, and will obey. Listen, my brothers—listen to the words of the Sun God! He commands that Melapanche and her assistants shall join with us in making medicine with which to anoint the Great Montezuma, when he first sets foot upon earth. Unless this is done he must return to his home in the sun, after two moons, never more to return. But if this medicine is made rightly, then the Sun God will never more leave his children; the pale-faces will be swept

from the earth and their goods and their weapons shall be given to the Apaches—the Club Apaches shall be the chosen children of the Sun God, and all other red-men shall call them father. This is the will of my master.”

“It is well; the Sun God shall be obeyed,” faltered Wakara.

“Then,” added the aerial voice, “let my son go to the serpents’ cave upon yonder hill, and with Melapanche, my daughter, there form the wonderful medicine. Let the Club Apaches remain here, night and day, until three suns have come and gone. Let them fast and watch. Let them not once remove their eyes from the lodge before the cave. Then when they see the smoke that my son raises, let them fall upon their faces and do homage, for Montezuma shall then appear unto them, never more to leave his children.”

After a few moments of unbroken silence, El Gallo made a quick gesture, and the prophetess re-entered the temple, soon after reappearing, followed by Paquita and Dolores, each bearing a small bundle, enveloped in embroidered medicine-robes. The Club Apaches silently made way for them, and the three women slowly followed El Gallo, who glided away toward the hills, never once glancing behind him.

But the Apaches had been thoroughly hoodwinked, and not one among them gave a thought to deceit. The quartette passed on, crossed the shallow stream, gained the hills, ascended the winding trail that led to the serpents’ cave and paused upon the ledge, the eyes of the Apaches never once leaving their persons. Nor did El Gallo speak until the ledge was gained.

“Thank God! we are fairly out of their toils! And you, Inez, dearest, bless you for your firmness! Had you failed or faltered then, all must have been lost!”

“I could not fail; I was working for you, husband—for you and our children. But see, the sun is setting. We must keep up the farce. Kneel; as true children of the Sun God, we must do homage to his emblem!”

“You are right, darling—we must play our parts until the darkness covers us,” replied El Gallo, and then the “medicine party” sunk upon their knees, their bowed faces turned

toward the west, and remained thus until the sun had sunk behind the horizon.

Then El Gallo arose and taking the bundles, entered the cave. Here he lighted one of the rude lamps, after filling it with oil from a skin flask that the bundles contained. By these feeble rays—which were effectually intercepted by the huge boulder that shielded the entrance from the curious eyes of the Apaches on the level—El Gallo hastily shaped the garments into a figure that would, at a distance, resemble the prophetess, and when this was arranged to his liking, he placed it upright against the boulder, where it might be indistinctly seen by the Apaches, when day dawned.

Then he lifted the lamp and cautiously proceeded deeper into the cave, with a revolver ready for use in case it should be required. His wife and children followed him closely, bearing a second lamp and a quantity of food. After a time the cavern apparently came to an end, but Inez, after a short search, found a boulder that turned as upon a pivot, and passing through, the rock closed behind them. It was by means of this secret passage that the messenger managed to escape the Apaches.

For full an hour El Gallo wound through the intricate passage, but then they emerged into open air beyond the range of hills. Then, after carefully consulting his chart, which had been left by the escaped messenger, he threw away the lamps and started boldly forward for the gold mountain, where he expected to meet his men.

The trail was rough and difficult, and the toil bore hard upon the women, who had been debarred from much exercise, but the hope of escape buoyed them up, and El Gallo was but little cumbered with them. The gold mountain was reached, just at daybreak, but to his horror, El Gallo did not find his men, as expected. He could see that they had been there from the trail.

At this moment he was startled by the faint report of firearms, coming from the range beyond. First came a single shot; then, after a long, painful suspense, a rattling volley. Then all was still.

El Gallo knew not what to do. If alone, he would have rushed forward to share the fortunes of his men, but he could

not take his helpless family into such danger. And yet, without horses and food, they must either perish in the desert or fall into the hands of the Apaches, who would show them little mercy when their tricks were found out.

"Look—a horseman!" whispered Inez, pointing toward an indistinct figure that rapidly moved up the valley.

"Yes—and an Indian—gone to alarm the village! The boys are alive, then; but they must be warned. Come—follow me—there is no time to lose!" excitedly cried El Gallo, darting forward toward the range of hills.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LUST OF GOLD.

LIKE human beavers the adventurers worked, scarce waiting to regain their breath ere they plunged again into the seething basin, giving thought to naught else than the store of precious nuggets that the envious veil of water concealed from view. The lust of gold, with all its soul-hardening power, had taken possession of them.

Sonora Ben stood upon the edge of the basin, inflating his lungs for another dive, when, suddenly his limbs became motionless as though carved from stone, and though his head moved not, his keen eyes roved swiftly over their wide field of vision.

Then he lazily stretched out his arms, half-turning around, yawning as if sleepy. Walking slowly toward the clump of bushes beside which his clothes lay, he flung himself at full length, with another curious glance upward.

Then his assumed air of laziness vanished. He grasped and cocked his rifle, raising it with the rapidity of thought, and firing almost ere the butt reached his cheek.

A shrill yell of death-agony told that the bullet had not been idly sped, and through the gray light of dawn a human figure, with limbs violently convulsed, could be seen spinning through empty space, to fall with a sullen splash into the

bed of the stream but a few yards above the waterfall. And the next moment the startled swimmers beheld the form of an Apache Indian diving head-foremost upon them, just clearing the water-sheet.

While standing there, Sonora Ben's quick eye had detected the contrasting colors of a painted helmet against the gray rocks, and looking more closely, made out the head of an Apache peering curiously down upon them. This might be a single brave, out on an early hunt for big-horns, or he might be the spy of a strong force—but that must be risked. Were he to escape, he would certainly guide the enemy—if not alone, the rifle-shot would give the signal. Hastily as he had decided, Sonora Ben adopted the wisest course. *That* Apache would carry no news.

"The Apash, boys!" cried the veteran, turning over upon his back, the easier to recharge his rifle. "Grup y'ur weep-ins and *cache*. I reckon thar's more o' the imps."

In this extremity the natural coolness of the trappers was plainly evidenced. Despite their having been taken so completely by surprise, by Sonora Ben's shot and his subsequent warning, not a word or a sound did they utter, but creeping from the basin, they crawled rapidly to where their weapons had been stacked, and then each seeking such cover as seemed best, they waited the result.

Not long were they kept in suspense. Half a dozen Apaches, mounted upon their nimble, sure-footed ponies, dashed around the point and almost rode over the ambushed trappers. Sonora Ben gave a little cry and dropped the leader—his shot was promptly echoed by a dozen others; and then as the smoke lifted, the riderless ponies were seen prancing around, snorting loudly, evidently not a little bewildered. Their late riders lay writhing upon the ground.

"Slip 'round, boyees, an' cut the critters off," cried Sonora Ben. "Ef one o' them gits back to the town, we'll hev the hull lot on our backs. Ef ye can't ketch 'em, shoot 'em—hurry up, thar!"

The old man was promptly obeyed, though not one of the party knew whether or no more of the Apaches were close at hand. But, as Ben said, if any one of the blood-stained ponies were to reach the village the result would be an in-

vestigation that could end only in the extermination of the gold-seekers.

Fortune still seemed to favor them, for no more Indians made their appearance, and the ponies were hemmed in and caught without a great deal of trouble. By this time Sonora Ben had clothed himself, and cautioning his comrades to keep upon their guard, he started out upon a scout, to learn, if possible, whether any of the Apaches had escaped. As he reached the mouth of the pass, he abruptly halted, a little curse breaking from his lips as he distinguished several forms moving over the level ground. But a few moments later convinced him of his error. He recognized his own handiwork in that tall, gayly-bedecked and painted figure. 'Twas El Gallo.

"An' he's got the female critters, too—glory to Jupeeter! I reckon this thing's a-goin' to pan out right a'ter all!" muttered Sonora Ben, his eyes glistening.

As he stepped out from the shadow of the pass, El Gallo leaped quickly before his dear ones, with drawn revolver.

"Don't be so brash, boss—'tain't perlite to draw a shooter on a old pard," quietly chuckled the veteran.

"That you, Ben? Where's the boys—what did you leave the gold-mountain for—and that firing—what has happened?"

"Hain't swallowed a 'volver, hev ye, that ye shoot off so many questions to once't? Sarvent, leddies! Ye see, boss, I don't reckon we'd better talk any more 'bout that gold-mountain, sence the durned stuff ain't no more gold 'n I be—"

"The men—where are they? What was that shooting?"

"Back yender—bin pluggin' some 'Patchies what kum down to see us swim. But we saved 'em all—"

"No you didn't—one escaped—we saw him, not ten minutes since, riding like mad for the town! And you stand about here, cutting your jokes—"

"Cuss the or'nary corntwisted luck! but be ye *sure*?"

El Gallo hastily explained what he had witnessed, soon after the firing, as detailed in the preceding chapter. Sonora Ben fully realized the peril that threatened them now and said, hastily:

"You foller—I'll go ahead to let the boys know—they

ain't in jest the fix to meet leddies now," and then started off at full speed.

He reached the little valley just as the adventurers were about to resume their novel gold-gathering.

"Quit that—you fellers hustle on y'ur clo'es in a hurry. The boss is comin', an' he's got some leddies wi' him. Hurry, ye durned chuckle-heads—I ain't jokin'—d'y' want to make pinny-poppy-show o' y'urselves? Monte Pete—kiver up them long crooked shanks o' your'n, or durned ef I don't 'call the turn' on ye!"

By dint of hard cursing, Sonora Ben got his men into a little more presentable appearance, by the time El Gallo and his family entered the valley. As the tall, nodding plumes of his head-dress were observed, more than one rifle was snatched up, and only the quick hand of Sonora Ben saved the leader's life. As yet the men were ignorant of the chief's purpose in leaving them, El Gallo fearing that they would object to it, as being dangerous—for were he detected, search would assuredly be made for his comrades.

El Gallo hastily explained to them what had occurred.

"Though, had not this one brave escaped you, we could have counted upon at least three days of perfect security, for not one of the Apaches would have dared leave the village, I fear we will see them now, before the day is gone, for the report of this warrior will arouse their suspicions. We may not be able to escape them, at the best—certainly will lose our hair if we remain here any longer. Come—saddle up and let's take the back trail."

During this hurried speech the brows of the gold-seekers lowered, and black, sullen looks of discontent passed between them. Then Monte Pete spoke up:

"Boss, I fer one ain't a-gwine to leave this 'ere cache, tel the bank ar' bu'sted. We've kem too fur an' hed a peck o' troubles to cave jest es the kurds begin to run on one side. What say, boys—shell we draw stakes now, or play the limit?"

"Break the bank or bu'st! We've fit the 'Patchies afore an' whipped 'em, too—I reckon we kin do it ag'in!"

"Hyar's as cottons to Yankee Dan an' Monte!"

"Same 'th this tearer!" chimed in another, until nearly

all of the adventurers expressed a resolve to remain where they were until the golden *cache* was exhausted, or they had lost their hair.

"But, boys—think!" urged El Gallo. "See—we have helpless women here—they ask your aid—will you see them perish without lifting a hand to help them?"

"We'll fight fer 'em as long as we kin chip in, boss, ary one o' us 'll stop a arrer or a lance 'th our own karkidges, rather then it shed hurt them—but it must be hyar. We ain't a-goin' to run away from sech a streak o' luck as this," earnestly responded Monte Pete.

"Let the durned chuckle-heads went, boss," angrily cried Sonora Ben. "I reckon we kin manidge 'ithout 'em. But we must puckachee right peart."

"Ralph and I will do our best for you, captain," quietly said Cyril Black, who, with Eaton, had separated from the gold-mad adventurers, and were now ready for work.

"Then the rest of you refuse?" added El Gallo.

"We must, boss. 'D like to please ye, but sech a run as this don't come every deal," respectfully added Monte Pete.

"Then God have mercy on you! for you will not one of you live to see the sun rise again!"

"Boys," said Sonora Ben, "we'll leave you the gold, but we must take the ponies the Apash left. We'll hev to ride like the devil beatin' tan-bark, an' 'll need extry critters."

"Take your pick; I reckon thar 'll be a-plenty left fer the fellers as 'll leave this hole wi' thar nat'ral head-kiverin'. We stay wi' our eyes open. We know 'at some o' us 'll git rubbed out, but then we know that those as *does* git off 'll hev enough to fight the tiger 'th all his life," laughed Monte.

Neither El Gallo nor Sonora Ben said any more, for they saw that the lust of gold was stronger than arguments or reason. Selecting stout, serviceable animals, the little party departed from the valley, leading an extra horse for each rider. And as they left, they glanced back to see the doomed trappers stripping to renew their search for gold.

Sonora Ben led the way through the mountains, choosing such trails and passes as would retain but few impressions, hoping thus to throw the Apaches off the scent, long enough to insure their safe retreat across the desert.

CHAPTER XIII.

PRICELESS TREASURES.

THE trail was a long and dreary one. Yet the skill of Sonora Ben was equal to the occasion. Winding through the hills, he gained the desert beyond. Then, twenty-four hours' steady riding carried them to the oasis, where poor Roaring Tom had met his death.

Though there was danger in delay, the little party remained at the oasis an entire day, to thoroughly recruit their animals for the death-journey that lay before them. But no Apaches made their appearance. Either they had obeyed the Sun-god's message, or else, in finding the gold-seekers, were satisfied that not one had escaped—since surely no pale-face would be bold enough to enter their village, or cunning enough to deceive the eagle-eyed Apaches, even though cunningly disguised.

Leaving the oasis with an ample supply of water in the skins and gourds that Apaches had brought to the spot, Sonora Ben led the way in a bee-line for the nearest point of water on the opposite side. His memory had been freshened by the recent journey, and he could more easily recognize the course he had taken in escaping from the Club Apaches.

The jornada was finally accomplished, though not without great suffering and privations. Yet, with one possible exception, I don't know but that it was the happiest trail the three couple ever traveled—for there *were* three couple now. First the ardent Cyril, from casting sheep's eyes at Paquita, began to assail her with even more dangerous words, couched in his sweetest, most persuasive tones. And Ralph soon imitated his bolder comrade, and the gentle-eyed Dolores was rendered happy. The long-severed husband and wife were so wrapped up in each other, that only Sonora Ben noted these symptoms and the old man's eyes twinkled merrily, and his hands chafed each other, as visions of what might come to pass, flitted before his mind's eye.

Nor was he mistaken. Within the year, El Gallo had two sons as well as daughters, and quite a little settlement was formed upon the fertile "River of Nuts" in Texas. The widowed mothers of our young friends had been coaxed to leave St. Louis. Sonora Ben resolved to roam no more in quest of gold mountains, but content himself with hunting—and acting as Mentor to the little "olive branches" that pruned up with wondrous rapidity.

And to this day, Cyril and Ralph congratulate themselves upon the priceless treasures they gained while searching for the fabulous MOUNTAIN OF GOLD.

Nothing further was ever heard of Monte Pete and Yankee Dan, with their companions. Beyond all doubt they fell victims to their lust of gold.

Yet, to this day, the curious traveler can hear tales of the wonderful mountain of gold, and if he expresses his doubt too bluntly, may, like Thomas C. Duncan, in '69, receive a half ounce of lead in his brain to cure his skepticism.

THE END.

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